

## **Who Do We Blame?**

### **Luke 22:39-46**

I once spent two years training as a pastoral counselor along with another student who in his previous career had been an "Accident Reconstruction Engineer." That job involves what you might imagine it does, showing up at the scene of an accident and attempting to reconstruct exactly what happened using evidence at the scene and the application of mathematics and applied physics.

He arrives at the scene, of say a train wreck, looks at the physical evidence (the curve of the tracks, the speed of the train, the location of the wrecked train, the degree of damage) and arrives at some conclusion as to what happened. His findings are used, along with eye witness accounts, to make a finding as what happened and who is to blame.

You can be sure that there is a group of Accident Reconstruction Engineers involved in understanding just what happened to the Airbus 737 Max 8 outside of Nairobi, Kenya last week. It was a horrendous accident. 157 people lost their lives. The lives of generations of family members and communities will continue to suffer.

So far the evidence points to faults with the airplane. Now, additional evidence is coming in that might not only implicate the Boeing Corporation but the FAA who allows Boeing to self-regulate. Others say Congress is at fault for underfunding the agency. So, who is to blame? Boeing, the FAA, Congress? And what needs to be done to assure this will not happen again?

We try to assign blame in our families as well. In matters far less critical than matters of life and death, we are our own accident reconstruction engineers.

- Someone has been in the kitchen and eaten the cake for that night.
- Someone has ripped a very nice dress to shreds and the evidence is everywhere.
- In our household, this is the guilty party: (show a picture of a guilty Shelby dog). She gets the blame.
- But it is more complicated than this. Someone left the cake on the edge of the counter, and someone did not put their clothes out of harm's way. Just don't ask me to rat on who that person is. It is easier just to, figuratively speaking, "kick the dog."

Well, what dog do we kick for the crucifixion of Jesus? An innocent man has been crucified as a common criminal. A miscarriage of justice has occurred. Centuries have passed, and we still discuss this crime and seek to have a definitive answer for who the culprit is. Let's look at the suspects.

Judas is the most obvious suspect. The money bag in his hands is hard evidence of a payoff. His hanging himself is yet more evidence that he felt he was indeed the cause.

But as we discussed a couple of weeks ago, this crime is more complicated than it seems. Jesus said to him, "Go and do what you must do and do it quickly." Might he only have been doing Jesus' bidding? How guilty is he if that is the case? And you don't think he was acting alone do you?

There is Pilate, the Roman governor who had final authority over any execution. All four gospels go to some length to limit his culpability. According to them, Pilate did his best not to execute Jesus. According to the gospels, he was pressured into crucifying Jesus by some of the Jewish leaders, who we are told blackmailed him, threatening to tell the emperor that he was not doing his job of keeping order in the backwoods disorderly province of Judah. If you cannot handle a tiny insignificant province like Judah, maybe you're just not management material.

But can we just declare him innocent because his intentions might have been good? Can you bow to peer pressure, allow others to push you to commit murder, and then just wash your hands in some water and declare yourself innocent? Is this what we want to teach our young people, "That's ok; your heart was in the right place. It is not really your fault. You were pressured into doing it."

Of course, there are always the Jewish leaders and the Jewish people. Historically, we have not only identified them as the suspect but convicted them and executed them time and time again. It was the fault of the Jews! They did it to our beloved Christ! They ought to pay the price! Our history books are filled with holocaust after holocaust culminating in the murder of over 5 and 1/2 million Jews by Nazi Germany. In three months alone, over 1.3 million Jews were killed.<sup>i</sup> (Living Science, "1.3 Million Jews Killed in Just 3 Months in the Holocaust," an article by Laura Geggel at [livingscience.com](http://livingscience.com), January 4, 2019)

We often focus on this last and worse holocaust, but there were many more killing fields that happened periodically throughout Europe in the Middle Ages. I leave today to go with my family to Rome where each year during Holy Week Jews were taken out of the fenced-in ghetto and forced to parade down the Via Della Corso where they were mocked, beaten, and abused.

If we read all four gospels, we discover the scriptural basis which was used as justification of this abuse and murder. The Jews were at the center of executing Jesus. Matthew, who points his finger most accusingly even has the crowd saying, "We will take responsibility for his death, we and our children."

The problem of simply accepting this placing of blame is that the gospel writers were not entirely neutral witnesses. Their primary goal was not to write a history of what happened, but proclaim their faith to a new generation. All of scripture ought to be understood in the context in which they were written. Our scriptures were written decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus and in a time when Christians and Jews had increasing animosity and open conflict towards each other. After 70 CE when Rome had defeated a Jewish rebellion and destroyed the temple and Jerusalem, Christians were motivated to further separate themselves from as being seen a sect of

Judaism. It would have been to their advantage to blame the Jewish leaders and the Jewish people and place less blame on the gentiles and Pilate who were by then the main focus of their evangelism. Pilate comes off looking rather good when historical sources tell us he was so brutal that even Rome had to direct him to not be so violent and eventually withdrew him his position.

It is unthinkable for us who are Christian to allow our scriptures to be used any longer to justify mass murder. If we are to judge a tree by the fruit it produces, then this fruit is rotten and poisonous. We no longer use "Slaves be obedient to your masters" to justify slavery because we understand the context in which those words were written, and the great suffering and violence those words have caused. While it may be true that *some* Jewish leaders cooperated with Pilate to avoid unrest and a potential crackdown in Israel, that is a far cry from blaming all Jewish leaders and all Jews for generations to come.

Then there is one other possibility: Maybe it was God. Don't faint at my suggestion. And no need to gasp. I am speaking about a much-cherished part of our Christian tradition shared by many good Christians. Maybe Jesus died because it was God's plan.

One version of this plan of God, which goes back to the late Middle Ages, is a bit harder hitting. In this version, Jesus must die. Violence is required. There is no redemption unless someone pays the price for sin. As we are all guilty of sin, we cannot provide an innocent sacrifice to satisfy the wrath of God for our evil. So God sends Jesus to pay this price and settle the debt. The main attraction of this understanding of the meaning of Jesus' death is that it tells us that one man, Jesus, loves us so much that he is willing to take our place and ensure our forgiveness. That is powerful stuff and why this idea speaks to many people who believe it is the only way to understand the great mystery of the atonement. The only problem is that God comes across as the one who slays Jesus, His only son, and it suggests that God is helpless to forgive without violence being committed. Are we to suggest that God is powerless without violence to forgive? What is the cost of our affirming a redemptive role for violence in our faith?

Another way to see the plan is that God asked Jesus to be faithful and to love no matter the cost.

- Hang out and eat with the worst sort of people with the worst sort of reputations even if good, righteous people are offended.
- Speak the truth to those who practice injustice and abuse of the poor, even if people want to kill you for it.

This was the plan of God: do what is right and be willing to die for the sake of the ones who will kill you. This plan does not celebrate or justify violence. It simply understands that this is what will happen if you dare to be good and do what is right. Do what is loving and compassionate and upset the wrong people and you will be killed. When Jesus was killed God turned that around and transformed the wrongful crucifixion of a good man to bring the world forgiveness and new life. Love wins. Life wins. The world wins.

Today we see Jesus in the garden praying desperately not to have to die. He understands that the forces of evil are out to get Him. He has crossed a line one time too many. The great moral leaders of our world all come to a time when they must face their fears and decide whether to proceed. Now He prays and pours His heart out hoping there might be some other way when He knows there is not. "Not my will," He finally concludes, "but Your will be done."

You can hear these word about God's will in one of two ways.

- One way is the hard-hitting version of seeing the death of Jesus. God has planned ahead that Jesus must die to pay the price of sin. Violence is required.
- The other way is a softer version of God. Jesus must die because this is what it means to love and have compassion. He is willing to pay the price and die for His friends and the world, not because God has to have this before God can forgive us, but because this is the way our world is.

We live in a world that lives by the myth of redemptive violence. "One man must die in order to save the nation," the leaders say after concluding that Jesus must be executed. A simple unfortunate necessity. Violence is necessary.

We live this out in many ways in our world:

- People yell at their children to teach them respect.
- We kill people who kill people to show that killing is wrong.
- We dehumanize people in prison, hoping that they will come out more human.
- We build our walls to stop hurting, desperate people from coming into our nation so we can make America great.
- We call some of our weapons of war, peacemakers.<sup>ii</sup>

(Barbara Brown Taylor, "God in Pain: The Myth of Redemptive Violence" p109)

This violence seems to be in our nature, and we seem to believe it will ultimately make us safe and make a better world. Many of us are disturbed by this contradiction, but too often acquiesce to violence and wonder if it may indeed be the only way.

But here comes Jesus who has an entirely different way. Jesus is hung on a cross and stubbornly refuses to fight.

- "He has taken into Himself all the violence flung against Him, and He will not give it back."
- "Condemned, He will not condemn."
- "Abandoned, he remains faithful."
- "The violence stops with Him. It caused His death, but it took none of His life.
- His life belongs to God, who sent Him to show us another way to live."<sup>iii</sup>

(Barbara Brown Taylor, "God in Pain: The Myth of Redemptive Violence" p109)

So who is to blame for this train wreck we call the crucifixion? What dog do we kick? (pause) Maybe it is like "Murder on the Orient Express." Maybe all the suspects are to

blame, including ourselves. For we all at times go along or we remain silent. A part of us still believes in the myth of redemptive violence, try as we might see it differently.

But we do not need to focus forever on the question of who is to blame. Not any longer. Because the one on the cross who came to show us another way is also the one who says to us all, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do?"

This is the Good News of our Lord. Let the people say, "Thanks be to God."  
Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Living Science, "1.3 Million Jews Killed in Just 3 Months in the Holocaust," an article by Laura Geggel at [livingscience.com](http://livingscience.com), January 4, 2019.

<sup>ii</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, God in Pain, "The Myth of Redemptive Violence," p. 109.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid, p. 109.