

**Sermon Preached by The Rev. Geoffrey S. Royce, Deacon
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, PA
on the Second Sunday in Lent, Year B
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I suspect that there are perhaps very few, if there are any, here among us who have been arrested...detained...questioned...charged...jailed. It's a pretty, private matter so I am not going to ask for a show of hands. In fact, the surprising statistic seems to be that thirty percent of Americans have a criminal record. Yes, that's almost one out of every three. And so, this means whether we know it or not we all probably work with, ride buses with, go to the library with people who have a criminal record.

How about whistle-blowers? There are probably not many of them gathered here either. They, like the prophets are calling us to a higher moral authority, questioning what we can trust.

I am considering all these questions about criminality, trust and risk because there are several significant figures in the biblical narrative who find themselves arrested, detained, questioned, charged, sentenced, jailed and executed, sometimes without the dignity of that entire process.

Most of the ones that come to mind are New Testament folk not the least of which is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. For reasons other than his association with Jesus, John the Baptist is arrested and jailed and eventually executed. The reasons for the Baptizer's execution were not worthy of such treatment but were the result of the fears held by a powerful leader. Similarly, we keep the memory of the execution of several infant boys whom we name the Holy Innocents, killed by Herod in his fear of the birth of a holy king. Saint Stephen, the first martyr is executed (actually lynched) vigilante mob style, being stoned to death. Saint Paul and Barnabas were jailed, Paul several times before he was executed. Peter was detained before he was executed. The author of the Gospel of John was essentially sentenced to exile on the Isle of Patmos.

From the Hebrew Testament, Joseph son of Jacob was in jail in Egypt. Several Israelite Kings were jailed for rebellion against ruling empires. The prophet, Jeremiah, was jailed. Presumably the prophet Isaiah was detained before he was executed by Manasseh who was a king who also found himself in jail

How do we define criminality? Some of the definition comes directly from moral codes. The Ten Commandments are the basis of almost all common law. Much of the law concerns itself with our relationships. God reckons Abraham's great faith to him as righteousness. Righteousness is about relationship, relationship to God as witnessed in one's relationship to one's neighbor. In other words, God can tell that we love God by the way we treat our neighbor. Jesus restates the Ten Commandments with just two. Love God completely, consummately and love neighbor as self.

What can we make of the fact that the central figure of our faith, our leader, our Lord, is perceived essentially from the beginning of his short life to its end, as an enemy of the religious and civil authorities? To us he appears to have done nothing wrong, a man without transgression against God or neighbor. He also seems to have no fixed address. The masses respond to him variously. When he gives them what they want they clamor for more. When he challenges them as in the healing of the Gerasene demoniac, the locals clamor to harm Jesus. Eventually the religious authorities clamor for an end to Jesus' ministry accusing him of blasphemy. One could say perhaps that Jesus seemed to consistently get into good trouble.

In our gospel today we find Jesus and Peter admonishing one another. "Get thee behind me Satan", Jesus says to Peter, while looking at the other disciples. Peter doesn't like this projected outcome.

“No! No! This can’t be! You are not going to be subjected to such treatment. They are wrong. You are the Son of God, the Messiah. You are our leader. What will we do? It can’t end like that. We aren’t finished yet. We aren’t ready.” And so, even in contention Peter’s love is revealed. Neither Peter nor the disciples can comprehend Jesus’s claim about rising again leave alone the necessity of the suffering and rejection. The necessity of the cross. These are the hard lessons we all have to learn over and over again, that we are not that distant from criminality, that we participate in it even in our striving for justice, because all sin is corporate.

Peter is setting his mind on worldly things. I am going to hazard another guess here. I am pretty sure that we are not so different from Peter. I know I’m not. Has anyone here managed to not set their mind on worldly things for any significant length of time? Perhaps not. How can we? The world is all we know. Most of what we call our benefits, our security, are vested in the world. It is in the world that we find beauty and sustenance. But none of that, no matter how essential, can be implemented without love and grace. And love therefore is the source and the cause of everything else and grace is the mover to which we owe our lives. We live, move and have our being in love. Love is other-oriented, is forgetful of self, come what may. Love bears transgression and forgiveness. Love bears the cross. Love bears the world, the moment, eternity.