

BLACKSBURG PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
REV. WILLIAM L. LOVE
MAUNDY THURSDAY
APRIL 9, 2009 7:00 P.M.

WERE WE THERE?

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Hebrews 10:16-25
Matthew 26:17-30

Hercule Poirot, the vain detective of Agatha Christie's novels, had completed a case in Baghdad. He intended to stay a few days in Istanbul but was summoned to come back to London so he boarded the Orient Express.

Before boarding the train, he saw a fellow traveler, an American named Ratchett: *He was a man of between sixty and seventy. From a little distance he had the bland aspect of a philanthropist. His slightly bald head, his domed forehead, the smiling mouth that displayed a very white set of false teeth, all seemed to speak of a benevolent personality. Only the eyes belied this assumption. They were small, deep set and crafty. Not only that. As the man...glanced across the room, his gaze stopped on Poirot for a moment, and just for that second there was a strange malevolence, an unnatural intensity in the glance.* [Agatha Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express*, from *Five Complete Hercule Poirot Novels*, 137]

On board the train, Ratchett approached Poirot to engage his services:

"Mr. Poirot, I am a rich--a very rich man. Men in that position have enemies. I have an enemy."

"Only one enemy?"

"Just what do you mean by that question?" asked Ratchett sharply.

"Monsieur, in my experience when a man is in a position to have, as you say, enemies, then it does not usually resolve itself into one enemy only." [Christie, 143]

Poirot refused the case.

Ratchett seemed to be saying, Someone will betray me.

* * *

When it was evening, Jesus sat at table with the twelve disciples, and as they were eating, said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." And they were very sorrowful, and began to say to Jesus one after another, "Is it I, Lord?"

* * *

During the night, after leaving Belgrade, the train came to a standstill, surrounded by banks of snow. The next day a passenger was discovered lying dead in his berth--stabbed. It was Ratchett.

He had been stabbed a dozen times. Some of the blows were *delivered with such force as to drive them through hard belts of bone and muscle.... Some glanced off doing hardly any damage...as though somebody had shut their eyes and then in a frenzy struck blindly again and again.* [Christie, 151]

There were no footprints in the snow to indicate someone had left the train. The murderer was still on board.

Poirot found in Ratchett's cabin a partially burned note that had still legible the words: *remember little Daisy Armstrong.*

Daisy Armstrong was a little girl who had been kidnapped. Her father, Colonel John Armstrong, paid an enormous ransom; then the girl was found murdered. Her mother Sonia was expecting another child. She was so shocked by the discovery that she *gave birth to a dead child, born prematurely, and herself died. Her brokenhearted husband shot himself.* [Christie, 162] A nursemaid, thought by the police to know something of the crime, threw herself from a window and was killed. She was later proved innocent.

A man named Casetti who had amassed great wealth through other such kidnappings was guilty, but through wealth and influence had been acquitted on a legal technicality. He left America, changed his name, and travelled abroad as a gentleman of leisure.

Ratchett, the murdered passenger, was Casetti, the kidnapper and murderer of little Daisy Armstrong.

Those on the train, who had access to the car where Ratchett's berth was, were:

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Hector MacQueen, Ratchett's secretary, who was the son of the district attorney who had prosecuted Casetti only to see him escape the justice due his crime;

Edward Henry Masterman, Ratchett's valet, who had served with John Armstrong during the war and had been his valet after the war;

Mrs. Hubbard, an elderly woman, who, at one time, had been a great tragic actress named Linda Arden, the mother of Sonia Armstrong and grandmother of Daisy Armstrong;

Greta Ohlsson, a Swedish woman, who had been Daisy Armstrong's nurse;

Princess Natalia Dragomiroff, who was a friend of Linda Arden and godmother of Sonia Armstrong;

Count and Countess Andrenyi, the countess being the younger daughter of Linda Arden and sister of Sonia Armstrong;

Colonel Arbuthnot, who had been the best friend of Colonel John Armstrong, who had saved his life in the war;

Cyrus Hardman, a New York detective, who had been in love with Susanne, the French nursemaid who had died in the fall from the window;

Antonio Foscarelli, the Armstrong's Italian chauffeur;

Mary Debenham, who had been the companion governess to the Armstrongs;

Hildegarde Schmidt, the Princess' maid, who had been the Armstrong's cook; and

Pierre Michel, a conductor on the train, whose daughter was Susanne, the Armstrong's French nursemaid.

Ratchett had seemed to say, someone will betray me. Each of these passengers would have to answer, Is it I?

* * *

Jesus said to his disciples, "One of you will betray me." Each of the disciples search his heart and said, "Is it I, Lord?"

* * *

On the Orient Express, the passengers in Ratchett's car formed a jury who decided that Ratchett, who was the kidnapper Casetti, deserved death. They carried out their plan. They drugged Ratchett/Casetti. And each in turn took the dagger and stabbed the kidnapper/murderer, accounting for the multiple wounds delivered with various force. No one knew which wound or combination of wounds was ultimately fatal, but all had participated in Casetti's death.

* * *

Each of the disciples said, Is it I, Lord? recognizing in himself the capacity to betray Jesus.

Judas is the one who betrayed him by selling him out for 30 pieces of silver. But all of the disciples betrayed him when they fell asleep in the garden and scattered to the winds in fear when Jesus was arrested and crucified. Peter claimed to be willing to fight to the death to save Jesus from those who would harm him, but Peter betrayed him when he denied he ever knew him.

This is Maundy Thursday, the night on which Jesus was betrayed.

* * *

Poirot had observed to Ratchett that, when someone is in a position to have enemies, it does not usually resolve itself to one enemy only.

It is perhaps true of Jesus as well. When he said, *One of you will betray me*, each disciple said, *Is it I?* And each of them did.

On this night, when we gather as followers of Christ, are we there in that room? Or do Christ's words reach across the ages to this room, saying, *One of you will betray me?* And, to be honest, do we have to ask, *Is it I, Lord?*

If Christ died for our sins, then it is I, and you, each of us. As hard as that is to face, it is vastly more difficult to realize that, if Christ did not die for my sins, your sins, the sin remains with me, with you.

No one knew who delivered the fatal stab wound to Casetti, so each could enjoy the sweetness of revenge or claim some measure of innocence. (It cannot be proved that my stab wound was fatal.)

But what about Jesus' death? Are the sins of any one of us only the however-many-billionth part

of the sin he died for? Can we subdivide our responsibility?

It was, I believe, Saint Augustine who said that God loves each of us as if there were only one of us. A corollary to that is, if only one of us had ever sinned (as each of us has), Jesus would still go to the cross to save that one. The sin of each of us is fatal. It cannot be subdivided.

In Texas, it is said, if you kill someone and can prove the person was a scoundrel and society is probably better off without them, you can be acquitted, but, if you steal a horse for whatever reason, you are going to prison.

One Texan explained this phenomenon by saying, *We've got more people that need killing than we do horses that need stealing.*

The self-appointed jury on the Orient Express was of the opinion that Casetti was one of those people who needed killing, and they probably could have convinced a Texas jury.

But what about Jesus? What motive could the Jews, or the Romans, or the disciples, or we offer to say Jesus was one of those who needed killing?

I will not presume to answer the question fully. But I have noticed people have a tendency to define their own goodness by comparison with the goodness (or lack of it) in other people (*I'm not so bad, especially compared to....*) as if righteousness were graded on the curve.

Jesus, who never broke faith with God or with any human being, presents us in human life a model of what human life can be. And it confronts us with how far short of human life our life is. It wrecks the curve. That's why we bet so much on his divinity and find his humanity so difficult to accept.

We also have a tendency to try to avoid facing that which is in us and which deforms our life. We tend to project those things onto others and hate them in others. Those things in others which we do not like (and which we do not like most vehemently) are most often those things in ourselves we do not like but cannot face.

The purity of Jesus's life, the wholeness of Jesus' life, does not allow us to project our spiritual maladies onto him. It serves to remind us of the great amount of hard work we would have to do to grow spiritually. And we would rather die, or let him die, than to do it.

If any of this is true, if the answer to the question, *Is it I, Lord?* is, in any sense, *Yes, it is I*, then how can we find any good in what we call Good Friday? How can we live with Maundy Thursday, the night when Jesus was betrayed, if it is I, it is we, who betray him?

I think the only way we can live with it, indeed the only way we can live, is if, while those who call themselves followers of Christ were up to betrayal, God were up to something else.

On the night, when he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and blessed and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then taking a cup, and having given thanks, Jesus gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

The forgiveness of sins. So that is what God was up to all along. And just when the darkness in the human soul seemed to have won, it lost for all time.

And the goodness of Good Friday is, as Jesus hung on the cross looking at those who betrayed him, who crucified him, he said, *Father, forgive them.*

And he said it not as a matter of principle but because in ways that are beyond our imaginations he loves you and me.

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Eastminster Presbyterian Church
Maundy Thursday
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