

5th Sunday in Lent
“I, Barabbas”
Matthew 27:15-26
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Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church
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Shortly before 9:30 p.m. on December 30, 1974, two armed men entered the Edmond Liquor Store in Edmond, Oklahoma. As 30-year-old Carolyn Sue Rogers, a store clerk, picked up the telephone, one of the robbers shot her in the head. The other robber ordered another store clerk, Norma Hankins, to open the cash register. The robber removed the money from the register. As Hankins bent down to pick up some money which had fallen to the floor, she heard another shot. Eighteen-year-old Belinda Brown, who had entered the store planning to use a fake ID to buy a bottle of tequila, was shot in the head- she survived while Carolyn Rogers did NOT.

Days later, while admitting that she couldn't remember much, Ms. Brown picked a 22-year-old black man named Glynn Simmons from out of a police lineup- someone who said he wasn't even in Oklahoma at the time of the robbery but in Harvey, Louisiana, playing pool. Several witnesses backed up his statement, saying they saw him in Harvey that day and the day after. Ultimately, Simmons and a co-defendant were convicted and sentenced to death. Their sentences were later changed to life in prison- the result of a Supreme Court ruling that declared the death penalty to be unconstitutional due to the way it was arbitrarily and unevenly applied.

Three months ago, an Oklahoma judge declared Simmons “innocent” after spending 48 years, 1 month, and 18 days in prison for a murder he never committed- the longest amount of time served by anyone wrongfully convicted in the United States. Now 70 years-old, Simmons said, “Validation and vindication has finally happened. It's a lesson in resilience and tenacity. When you know you're innocent, stick with it and don't ever stop. Don't let nobody tell you it can't happen because it really can.”

Well, this morning, we find ourselves spectators to yet ANOTHER trial involving yet ANOTHER horrible injustice, but THIS time, all the WISHING and HOPING in ALL THE WORLD was not going to change the outcome. This one took place some two thousand years earlier and where the defendants could not have been any more different. Jesus was on trial for sedition and subversion, crimes against the Roman Empire which would result in the cruelest death imaginable- crucifixion. The one presiding over the whole proceeding was the Roman governor Pontius Pilate whose main responsibility was to maintain order and keep the peace even if it was enforced at the end of a spear. After having been shuttled throughout the night between Pilate and Herod, Jesus now awaits his final judgment.

Pilate, however, is not quite convinced of his guilt and instead of just declaring him innocent and then letting him go, he institutes a whole series of half-measures which he hopes will satisfy both the religious leaders who originally brought the charges and the increasingly hostile crowd which has gathered in the square before them. First, on hearing that Jesus was a Galilean and therefore under Herod's jurisdiction, he had him transferred to him with the hope that HE would deal with him. But Herod had him returned to him unsentenced. Then he promised to have Jesus scourged and released, hoping the bloodlust of the Jews would be

satisfied but they weren't. Then we come to this morning's lesson where Pilate refers to an ancient custom that grants pardon to the guilty as an act of clemency. He does so in the hope that the people will choose one crazy rabbi with Messianic pretensions over a disreputable thief and murderer named Barabbas.

We might gain some insight into who Barabbas was by his name. It means "the son of the father or master" and it's been speculated that Barabbas was actually the son of a rabbi, one whose father was a teacher of the Jewish law. MATTHEW refers to him as a "notorious prisoner"; MARK says that Barabbas "was imprisoned with some rioters, one who in the riot had committed murder"; LUKE mentions him as "one who had been thrown into prison for a certain riot that had occurred in the city, and for murder"; and JOHN simply says, 'Barabbas was a robber.' Putting all those facts together, it seems more than likely that he was a ZEALOT, a member of a sect of Jews who were extreme nationalists. They believed that the Jewish people should be subject to no one but God and persuaded the people to refuse to pay tribute to Rome. They burned with a spirit of independence and were guilty of all sorts of political murders, seditions, riots, robberies and other crimes. If this was true, then he'd be the first-century equivalent of a member of al Qaeda, the Muslim fundamentalist group that CONTINUES to terrorize the Middle East TODAY.

If we're right, we'd have a son of the synagogue who once knew the power of love and peace in his life who NOW burned with the stirrings of hatred and war in his heart. But somewhere along the line, something inside him had gone wrong and he was about to pay the full price for his sins. However, restrained by iron shackles, Barabbas was bound by EVEN GREATER chains- by chains of IGNORANCE that blinded him to the light of Jesus' ministry and God's love made manifest through it; by chains of SELF-DECEPTION that made him think that force and violence were the only means to bring about change than faith and love and justice; by chains of FEAR AND HATRED AND SUSPICION that made him regard every man an enemy rather than a brother or sister.

Now every Passover, there was a privilege granted to the Jews by the Romans in which one prisoner was allowed to be released. He was granted unconditional freedom with all crimes charged against him completely wiped away. This custom coincided with the Passover festival which celebrated the release of the Israelites from the bondage of Egypt. It also looked back to the sacrificial ceremony described in the Old Testament book of Leviticus in which two goats were brought by the people to the high priest. After cleansing himself, he would then cast lots upon them in the presence of the Lord. The goat on which the lot fell had the name of "Jehovah" inscribed upon it and it was offered to God as a sin-offering to him. It represented the sins of the people and after being slaughtered was then carried outside the camp where it was burned and its ashes scattered to the winds. The other goat had the name "Azazel" written on it and was then set free. It was allowed to wander through the fields and woods of Israel, just as the Israelites wandered in their escape from Egypt. It could pasture where it pleased and enjoy itself wherever it wanted for no hunter could shoot it. It was free as long as it lived.

When Pilate proposed they give the people the option of deciding whom they would like released, it seemed inconceivable to him that they would ever choose a violent thief and murderer over someone so peace-like as Jesus. In fact, he thought he was being clever by choosing a prisoner who was guilty of the VERY SAME charge they brought against Christ, namely, sedition against Caesar. Thus, the scene was now set and what we have before us is a

judgment tribunal. Side-by-side they stood- on the one side was Barabbas, the political desperado stained with murder; on the other was a Healer, a Teacher, the Son of Man and Son of God who had done nothing but preached love and practiced good. The jury was a frenzied mob, inhabitants of Jerusalem, those who had been hearers of his words, the subjects of his miracles, and the objects of his love. When Pilate asked them, "Which of the two do you wish to be released?" their answer was one he hadn't expected. With one voice, the mob exclaimed, "Away with this man and release to us Barabbas!"

Friends, here we see the hardness of people's hearts deliberately set against the ultimate expression of God's love in this world- the life of his only Son, Jesus. As John says in his gospel, "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil and the light exposed them for what they were." We are finally left with this chilling sentence in Luke, "So Pilate gave sentence that their demand should be granted. He reluctantly released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, whom they asked for; but JESUS he delivered up to their will."

All four gospels document this event because this scene between Barabbas and Christ is more than just part of the Passion record, it is also a symbol and parable. You see, the murderer and thief in this story is also US. Without exception- minister and laity, Baptist and Presbyterian, Elder and Deacon- we TOO, stand in SIMILAR judgment before our God. As the Apostle Paul tells us, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that everyone may receive the things done in his body, according to that he or she hath done, whether it be good or bad." And if we truly know our hearts, we know we have no reason to boast before God but rather to feel ashamed: for the lack of love in our lives, for the insensitivity towards our spouses or our neighbors, for the gossip and back-biting that ruins reputations, for the selfishness and self-aggrandizement that makes us feel superior to others, for the white lies we tell which blossom into great lies, for the temptations we continually give in to which dishonor our minds and our bodies, for the manner in which we make ourselves invisible when somebody asks us for help. The fact is that ALL OF US are on trial from the time we get up in the morning till the time we go to bed; EACH OF US stands before God no better nor acceptable than Barabbas was when HE stood before that court 2000 years ago.

Of course, it's only natural that we would take exception at the suggestion Barabbas is actually a picture of ourselves. We protest, "I'm no Barabbas! That man was a rogue and a rebel, a thief and a murderer- I am NONE of these! I'm respectable. I have a fine job and a good family. I'm a member of the Lions Club and an elder in my church." But then so were the priests and scribes that falsely turned Jesus over to the authorities- they TOO held prestigious positions in their churches. But they used all their respectability and their prestige and their influence to hide their evil hearts and to have Jesus falsely arrested. Then they incited the crowds to call for his death. If they could fall from such great heights, what makes us think that our position is any more secure than THEIRS was?

Years ago, the Presbytery asked if I would serve on an Administrative Commission to investigate some serious charges that had been leveled against another minister by one of his parishioners. Our work would require months of investigation including putting the pastor on administrative leave, speaking to all the parties involved, disbanding session, and assuming all the day-to-day responsibilities of the church ourselves. After nine months, we were satisfied that the complaint was meritless and that we should restore the minister to his previous position.

But the Executive Presbyter at the time, who AGREED there was no basis to any of the charges, insisted that we needed to fire him REGARDLESS and find new leadership for the church, that the minister's credibility would be tainted from there on in. The truth was that she was more concerned about how she and the presbytery would LOOK than the RIGHT thing to do in this instance. Well, the committee grew strangely silent until I opened my mouth. I said, "You tell me how after nine months of investigation and having declared the man innocent of all charges, we can in good conscience fire him, even though he's been an excellent minister with no previous problems in this presbytery for more than twenty-five years. Wouldn't we then be no better than PONTIUS PILATE who declared Jesus to be innocent but then sent him out to be executed ANYWAY?" With that, the rest of the committee agreed with ME instead of the EP and he was restored to his office as pastor of that church. I can assure you that the Presbytery's Executive Presbyter wasn't too pleased with me after that.

But if that is the BAD news, hear now the GOOD! There can be no GREATER news to our ears than that WE ARE ALL BARABBAS this morning, for if we are INDEED that hard and vicious criminal- the son of a rabbi and child of the synagogue, then we are NO LESS Barabbas- the forgiven offender and pardoned lawbreaker. As unjust and contemptible as the whole proceedings were--an innocent man suffering while a guilty murderer is turned loose--it is a scene that means all the difference in the world FOR US. You see, if we ARE Barabbas, then WE TOO hear the pronouncement, "You are now free!" If we ARE Barabbas, then as his chains and restraints are removed, SO TOO are our OWN. If we ARE Barabbas, then as all charges are dropped, SO TOO is OUR status unconditionally changed- for Jesus has been exchanged for us; the just one becomes the criminal and criminal is now made just. The innocent man is condemned bearing the murderer's guilt, while the murderer is treated as though he were spotless and unstained. Barabbas was now free to go wherever he wanted and no one was allowed to harm him or exact vengeance. Just as Glynn Simmons experienced this past December, Barabbas TOO was unexpectedly liberated to breathe and smell the fresh air of freedom from that day forward until the day he died.

My friends, if this is SO, then this becomes the greatest news you or I can ever hear- that WE TOO are Barabbas. If you cannot see yourself as that man, as Barabbas the rebel, Barabbas the thief and murderer, Barabbas the sinner, you will NEVER know the joy of liberation and freedom he experienced that day! As St. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." This is the Good News of the Gospel, that we now know there is no sin great enough to ever separate us from the love and presence of our God, that we have been completely pardoned like that lamb with AZAZEL written upon it and like that thief and murderer BARABBAS; we TOO have now been liberated to live in perfect freedom in God's presence throughout the rest of our lives. Herein is God's love revealed to us, that Jesus--the innocent one--didn't have to die but he did ANYWAY, and as a consequence, we TOO have been declared innocent and released from death row; like Glynn Simmons, we TOO are "ready to live now," to discover each day filled with a new-found joy and gratitude and love to God for providing us with what we did not deserve nor could ever earn for ourselves. It is through Christ alone and his love that you and I have come to know REAL freedom, ETERNAL freedom, a liberation that NO ONE will ever be able to take from us. Let us pray...

Heavenly Father, we cannot claim to be more holy or righteous than anyone else, not even Barabbas. Like him, we too know what it is to hate or steal or be rebellious at times. But like him, we ALSO know what it is to receive pardon at your hands, to be forgiven for things that have hurt you deeply. Help us to live each day in the fullness of our new-found freedom and may

we experience a fresh and ever-growing love of Christ for this gift he alone made possible. In his name we pray. Amen.