

2011 Maundy Thursday Sermon

Many of you know that I am, well, a freak of a U2 fan. If you didn't know that, you do now! :-) I bring this up because tonight, I want to share with you some wisdom from Bono, the band's lead singer. In an interview, Bono talks about the difference between Grace and Karma. He says: "the thing that keeps me on my knees is the difference between Grace and Karma... at the center of all religions is the idea of Karma. You know, what you put out comes back to you: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or in physics; in physical laws every action is met by an equal or an opposite one. It's clear to me that Karma is at the very heart of the universe. I'm absolutely sure of it. And yet, along comes this idea called Grace to upend all that "as you reap, so you will sow" stuff. Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions... I'd be in big trouble if Karma was going to finally be my judge... It doesn't excuse my mistakes, but I'm holding out for Grace. I'm holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the Cross, because I know who I am, and I hope I don't have to depend on my own religiosity."

I think the difference between Grace and Karma can be seen throughout the scriptures. And, the difference between these two concepts really stands out for me in the Gospel story we hear tonight. The setting, of course, is the Last Supper. And John's account of the Last Supper focuses on Jesus' servant act of washing the feet of his disciples. Love is the prominent theme, but the themes of denial and betrayal creep in.

One of the disciples protests the foot washing. Peter says, "You will never wash my feet." And Jesus tells him, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Jesus knows that Peter is about to deny him, but he is concerned that Peter 'has his share with him.' He is concerned that Peter is with him, and he draws Peter and all of the disciples close to himself by washing their feet, by serving them. The story doesn't say so, but I think we can safely assume that Judas had his feet washed also. And, as the story mentions several times, Jesus knows that Judas is about to betray him. One of his closest friends is about to hand him over to death. John tells us: "The devil had already put into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him." And, Jesus "knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean'."

Peter and Judas, as Bono puts it, "would be in big trouble if Karma was going to finally be [their] judge." We can just imagine what would happen to these two guys if Karma were the bottom line, right? But Grace wins out. I don't know about you, but when people I love hurt me, I want to put some distance between me and them, I want to hold them at arm's length – at least for a little while – because when I'm hurt, the last thing I want to do is to make myself vulnerable to any more hurt. And, I will confess to you that I sometimes really do want Karma to get 'em. Terrible, I know. But does any

one else ever do the same thing or feel the same way? (Assuming people will nod in agreement.) I think it's only human nature.

Now, Jesus knows that the people he loves, the people he loves the most are about to do some really awful, really horrific things to him, but he doesn't put any distance between himself and his friends. He's about to be hurt very deeply, hurt perhaps more deeply than anyone ever has been or ever will be again, but he doesn't remove or isolate himself from his friends at all. In fact, he does the exact opposite. He brings them even closer to himself with truly intimate acts – sharing a meal with them and washing their feet. This is not a “keep your friends close and your enemies closer” kind of situation. Jesus’ love for his disciples, his love for his friends overpowers their denial and betrayal. “Love interrupts... the consequences of [their] actions” as Bono puts it, and Grace wins out.

Karma is bad news not just for Peter and Judas, but for all of us. As Donald reminded us on Palm Sunday, all of us are capable of horrific things. All of us are sinners in need of God's Grace. As Bono says in the interview, "The point of the death of Christ is that Christ took on the sins of the world, so that what we put out did not come back to us, and that our sinful nature does not reap the obvious death. That's the point. It should keep us humbled. It's not our own good works that get us through the gates of heaven." As we continue our journey through Holy Week and Easter over the next few days, let yourself be humbled by this good news. Let yourself be humbled by the knowledge that Karma is never the bottom line. Let yourself be humbled by the knowledge that because of Christ's love for us – proven to us by his death on the cross, because of this, Grace always wins out.