

Before reading our Scripture this morning, I want to tell a story. This story comes from the famous storyteller Leo Tolstoy.

Leo Tolstoy tells the story of how there lived in olden times a good and kindly man. He had this world's goods in abundance, and many slaves to serve him. And the slaves prided themselves on their master, saying:

“There is no better lord than ours under the sun. He feeds and clothes us well, and gives us work suited to our strength. He bears no malice, and never speaks a harsh word to anyone. He is not like other masters, who treat their slaves worse than cattle: punishing them whether they deserve it or not, and never giving them a friendly word. He wishes us well, does good, and speaks kindly to us. We do not wish for a better life.”

Thus the slaves praised their lord, and the Devil, seeing it, was vexed that slaves should live in such love and harmony with their master. So getting one of them, whose name was Aleb, into his power, the Devil ordered him to tempt the other slaves. And one day, when they were all sitting together resting and talking of their master's goodness, Aleb raised his voice, and said:

“It is stupid to make so much of our master's goodness. The Devil himself would be kind to you, if you did what he wanted. We serve our master well, and humor him in all things. As soon as he thinks of anything, we do it: foreseeing all his wishes. What can he do but be kind to us? Just try how it will be if, instead of humoring him, we do him some harm instead. He will act like anyone else, and will repay evil for evil, as the worst of masters do.”

The other slaves began denying what Aleb had said, and at last bet with him. Aleb undertook to make their master angry. If he failed, he was to lose his holiday garment; but if he succeeded, the other slaves were to give him theirs. Moreover, they promised to defend him against the master, and to set him free if he should be put in chains or imprisoned. Having arranged this bet, Aleb agreed to make his master angry next morning.

Aleb was a shepherd, and had in his charge a number of valuable, pure-bred sheep of which his master was very fond. Next morning, when the master brought some visitors into the enclosure to show them the valuable sheep, Aleb winked at his companions, as if to say:

“See, now, how angry I will make him.”

All the other slaves assembled, looking in at the gates or over the fence, and the Devil climbed a tree nearby to see how his servant would do his work. The master walked about the enclosure, showing his guests the ewes and lambs, and presently he wished to show them his finest ram.

“All the rams are valuable,” said he, “but I have one with closely twisted horns, which is priceless. I prize him as the apple of my eye.”

Startled by the strangers, the sheep rushed about the enclosure, so that the visitors could not get a good look at the ram. As soon as it stood still, Aleb startled the sheep as if by accident, and they all got mixed up again. The visitors could not make out which was the priceless ram. At last the master got tired of it.

“Aleb, dear friend,” he said, “pray catch our best ram for me, the one with the tightly twisted horns. Catch him very carefully, and hold him still for a moment.”

Scarcely had the master said this, when Aleb rushed in among the sheep like a lion, and clutched the priceless ram. Holding him fast by the wool, he seized the left hind leg with one hand, and, before his master's eyes, lifted it and jerked it so that it snapped like a dry branch. He had broken the ram's leg, and it fell bleating on to its knees.

Then Aleb seized the right hind leg, while the left twisted round and hung quite limp. The visitors and the slaves exclaimed in dismay, and the Devil, sitting up in the tree, rejoiced that Aleb had done his task so cleverly. The master looked as black as thunder, frowned, bent his head, and did not say a word. The visitors and the slaves were silent, too, waiting to see what would follow.

After remaining silent for a while, the master shook himself as if to throw off some burden. Then he lifted his head, and raising his eyes heavenward, remained so for a short time. Presently the wrinkles passed from his face, and he looked down at Aleb with a smile, saying:

“Oh, Aleb, Aleb! Your master, the Devil, bade you anger me, but my master is stronger than yours. I am not angry with you, but I will make your master angry. You are afraid that I shall punish you, and you have been wishing for your freedom. Know, then, Aleb, that I shall not punish you; but, as you wish to be free, here, before my guests, I set you free. Go where you like, and take your holiday garment with you!”

And the kind master returned with his guests to the house; but the Devil, grinding his teeth, fell down from the tree, and sank through the ground.

During this season of Lent we are reading through the passion narrative. The passion narrative are the events leading up to and including the death of Christ. Last week we read of the woman from Bethany who poured out the precious and very expensive perfume on the head of Jesus and how she was criticized by others around her for being wasteful. They cared nothing about the pour but they only wanted to embarrass her. Rather than condemning her, Jesus affirmed her faith and her generosity. Today we read what happens next according to the gospel writer Mark.

Read Mark 14: 10-26

So Jesus has his closest 12 followers. His 12 followers that he had handpicked to be his leaders. And we learn today that one of them, Judas Iscariot, is outed as a betrayer. As Jesus and these twelve followers gather together for the Passover Meal and what we know now as the last supper, Jesus says to this assembled crowd, one of you will betray me.

The crowd of followers become very anxious. “Surely not I,” they say to one another. But then Jesus says again that one of you will betray me. So here is Jesus, he is gathered with these 12 closest followers and Jesus has identified that one of them will betray him to the authorities. And so what does Jesus do? Jesus takes a loaf of bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to each of them.

He tells them to “take and eat for this is my body.” And then Jesus takes a cup, and after giving thanks, he gives the cup to each of them. “This is the blood of the covenant, poured out for many.”

When faced with the person who will betray him and help to have him crucified, Jesus gives him communion. Jesus doesn't run Judas away so that only the pure and faithful are served, Jesus offers his betrayer Holy Communion.

If you are like me, you have been betrayed. Maybe it was a spouse who broke a marriage vow. Maybe it was a child who stole money from your possession. Maybe it was a friend who turned her back on you when you needed her most. Maybe it was a parent who let you down when you felt that you most needed them. Maybe it is someone in your church family that did not live up to your expectations for them. Maybe it is someone that you looked up to as a leader who has broken a promise to you.

Everyone of us has felt betrayed in our lives. Maybe we have come into worship feeling the sting of betrayal right now. We all know what it is like to feel betrayed. Jesus knew what it was like to be betrayed. Jesus was betrayed by one of his handpicked followers who turned his back on him when Jesus did not live up to his expectations.

But this is where to be a real follower of Jesus gets to be really hard. Because when we are betrayed, our human tendency (guided by the devil?) is to want to get back at the person for whatever reason. Our human tendency is to want to do unto them what they have done unto us. We want them to feel pain like we feel pain.

But when we feel the pain of betrayal, you and I are invited to remember what Jesus did to the person who betrayed him. Jesus welcomed his betrayer to a meal of Holy Communion.

If we really want to be close to Jesus Christ, how many of us are willing to go the step of serving someone who has betrayed us? AMEN.

-Tolstoy, Leo, "Evil Allures, but Love Endures,"

<http://learningtogive.org/materials/folktales/EvilAllures.asp>

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