



The Most Fascinating People: Barabbas

TEXT
Mark 15:6–15

August 2, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Barabbas was not a good man. Oh, he had his reasons. He was in prison because he was among those who engaged in revolt against Rome. Barabbas wanted his life and the life of his community to be better. He hated the oppressive realities of occupation. He resented how Rome belittled the life of Jews. He dreamed of the day when they would be free. Barabbas was so committed to his cause that he was willing to kill to bring about his vision of the good. If he could just destroy the bad guys, life would be good.

The problem is the bad guys are never purely bad; but even more troublesome, the good guys are never purely good.

That's why I say he was not a good man. But if you ask him, I imagine he would disagree. He might go so far as to tell you that he was a hero. The crowd that called his name might agree.

Many scholars question the historical accuracy of this moment. They find it implausible that Pilate would have permanently released a prisoner by letting the crowds decide who

gets freedom — and certainly not one imprisoned for insurrection. They also question why such a practice would not be noted in writings outside of the gospels.

So maybe this isn't historically accurate; maybe it's theology and not history that is the gospel's concern. It's not about the fact of Barabbas; it's about who God is.

We don't know much about him except that he thought he was a hero, as evidently so did this crowd. And we know his name is Barabbas. Barabbas is an important name. Barabbas is the perfect name.

Do you remember the name that Jesus had for God? It was Abba. When you pray, he says, pray Abba. *Abba* means "father." *Bar* means "son." So *Bar-abbas* means "son of the father." It's ironic isn't it? The crowds are asked to choose between Jesus and a man named "Son of the Father."

They chose Barabbas.

The first thing to note is that Jesus had no say in the matter, but we know how he would have voted. Had Pilate asked Jesus to make this decision, he would have chosen the same. *Let Barabbas, the son of the Father, go free.*

That's who he was.

I like that the historians wonder if there really was a Barabbas. Because if they can't find a particular son of the father, then this could be the story of any son of the father; this is the story of any child of God. If I understand it, this is the story of *every* child of God.

And what we find in this story is that everyone involved is doing what they think is best. Everyone is a hero. The crowds are doing what they think is best. Pilate acts as if he has no choice; it is the will of the people, a democratic moment in a dictator's life. Barabbas is a hero in his own eyes.

It's one of those moments that reveal how hard it is to honestly see the limits of our virtue. It's what John Calvin used to call "total depravity." Total depravity doesn't mean there is no good in human beings. No, not that at all. It's that we are never pure. It's that human virtue is limited, and so often it is hard to see the limit of our virtue. In other words, bad folks are never purely bad; but equally true, good folks are never purely good.

Charlotte and Jim were celebrating their 65th wedding anniversary — 65 years together.

Cheryl, who had been married about 15 years, said to Charlotte, “Sixty-five years! I can’t imagine being married to the same man for 65 years.”

Charlotte said, “Oh honey, I know this man better than his own mother does. And if there is anything I can promise you, it is that he is not the same man.”

In marriage, we learn some things about each other.

Hartley Hall was the president of Union Seminary when I was a student there. When he found out that Carol and I were engaged, he said, “Tom, you won’t be able to lie anymore.”

I said, “I’m not lying to her.”

He said, “I didn’t say that. You won’t be able to lie to yourself anymore. She will know the truth of you.”

He was right. It’s not as easy as it seems to know the truth of ourselves. Our capacity to see the truth of ourselves is limited.

I learn this every time I go back and read an old sermon. Sometimes I get an invitation to go preach out of town. I think, “That sermon I preached last fall, it was pretty good. I’ll preach that one.” I read it again. I think, “Well, that was an off week.”

So I read another one. “Hm-mm, that’s funny.”

By the time I have read four or five, I am amazed that you folks are still here. Our capacity to see the limits of our virtue is compromised.

An example: Ray Tensing shot and killed Sam Dubose

this week. You saw it all over the news. The prosecutor in Cincinnati had some harsh things to say about Officer Tensing. It’s not how Officer Tensing describes the situation. He will tell you he was doing something good that had an unfortunate result. I would suggest it’s more complicated than that.

What we have witnessed time and time again is that everyone struggles to see the humanity in people who are different than we are. No one is exempt. When someone is different, the difference can be race; it can be social status; it can be cultural; it can be level of education; it can be religion. But when someone is different from us, it is harder for us to see the humanness in them.

That’s often how racism works. The most dangerous forms of racism are not the Confederate flag-waving, vitriol-spewing, white bed sheet-covered marches. No, racism’s most dangerous characteristic is that it is so often invisible in us. We don’t see it in ourselves. It’s hard to know the whole truth of our hearts.

My wife Carol is a patient woman. I remember the time she said to me, “Tom Are, there are some wonderful things about you. And I am choosing to focus on those wonderful things because if I didn’t, all those other things about you might drive me crazy.”

What I am saying today is that we need some humility about ourselves and our ways. We are more complicated than

we sometimes can see. We think the world ought to be the way we think the world ought to be. But our virtue is limited.

The historians say there may never have been a man named Barabbas, but that is foolish. I know Barabbas. My name is Barabbas and so is yours — and so is every child of God.

And each one of us stands in the presence of Christ, mindful of our virtues, but less aware of our failings, and still he chooses us. He says, “Let them go. I have come to set them free.”

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.