

3rd Sunday of Epiphany

Sermon 1.24.16

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Luke 4:14-30

It's not what Jesus said. It's what he *didn't* say.

Here's what I mean: Quentin Tarantino has a new movie out, *The Hateful Eight*. Like most of his movies, it's enjoying mostly positive, even rave, reviews. I haven't seen it, and I don't intend to. So I'm going on what I've read – that the director is a virtuoso with a camera, writes some of the best dialogue in the business, and gets the excellent work out of the people he collaborates with (actors, cinematographers, composers, etc.) In the words of the film critic to whom I pay most attention, Dana Stevens of *Slate*, "*The Hateful Eight* is bold, gorgeous, verbally clever, morally repellent, and, in some way I am still struggling to put my finger on, possibly somehow evil."

I believe I can help her in this regard.

Tarantino is preoccupied with the narratives of injury and injustice that abound in history. His preoccupation has him returning to these narratives – of Nazi Germany and its subjugation of the Jews; of the slave-holding American south. He revisits in order to rewrite; he revisits to turn these narratives of injury into revenge fantasies. In *Inglorious Basterds*, a Jewish woman kills Hitler, and in spectacular fashion, of course. In *Django Unchained*, a slave gets his revenge with a gun and a whip, the white slaveholders whom he attacks screaming and begging for their lives, the black slaves standing watch in frightened awe. (On the YouTube page where I found this clip, the first comment is "How satisfying," which is exactly right. Revenge is very satisfying.)

This movie, *The Hateful Eight*, apparently, doesn't have a single such narrative to revisit. Set in the American West after the Civil War, it has many such narratives to revisit. Each of the characters, from what I gather, comes with his or her own particular grievance, and they make up a social fabric that's emblematic of the social fabric of America today. There's an abused and vengeful woman, a white racist from the South, a black Union army veteran, a cowboy, a Mexican sidekick, and an assortment of others.

They all end up eventually in one room, taking shelter from a blizzard closing in on them, where they proceed apparently to rip each other apart.

Tarantino has been thought a cynic – cynically aligning himself with oppressed groups, most especially black Americans, so he can get away with dialogue that, in seeking to be edgy, relies heavily on the n-word. (I think that's the one word in the English language that I don't utter, and certainly not from the pulpit.)

He's been thought to be positioning himself to seem radically just, a disturber of the peace speaking hard truths to a complacent, compliant public. But, really, who here isn't against Nazism, the genocide of the Jews, and American slavery? To find such things offensive, demonstrative even of deep evil, isn't radical. It's human. Plus, it's also not particularly costly. To take a stance against Hitler or against the Middle Passage: these are easy stances because both phenomena, Nazism and slavery, have fallen. (Though racism, obviously, I'm sorry to say, remains with us.) On the other hand, to take issue with the films is either to seem soft on Naziism and slavery, or simply a prig and a prude.

More critically considered, now, Tarantino has been called to task for exploiting the grievances of actual oppressed people. As a white man, who is he to tell the story of slavery in a way that has him identifying with the black people slavery worked to death? As a non-Jewish American, who is he to tell the story of the Jews and all of Europe held captive to Nazi ideology and genocide?

It would be easy to argue these points away. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* wasn't written by a black person, and certainly not by a slave; Harriet Beecher Stowe was a white Northern woman of social privilege. *The Hiding Place* wasn't written by a Jew who'd been hidden away, but by the Dutch homeowner who did the hiding, Corrie ten Boom. Of course, it's within full of rights of any of us to tell stories that aren't completely ours. You could even argue it's the responsibility of those with power and authority to tell stories that give voice to the silenced, the disenfranchised and oppressed. Putting that aside, though: how much the poorer the world would be if Shakespeare hadn't written *Othello* (after all, he wasn't a Moor) or *The Merchant of Venice* (after all, he wasn't a Jew).

That said, I think it's a valid criticism of Tarantino, and a vital one, and with every movie he makes a more pressing one: Quentin Tarantino peddles in resentment – and resentment isn't simply a personal emotion, it's a social force that quickly becomes destructive – society ripping itself apart.

It's his glee at stirring up deep resentments that I find morally repellent and, yes, possibly evil – which is why Jesus *didn't* say it.

Here's what Jesus *did* say: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Most surprisingly, he concluded this reading *there*, saying, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

This reading, which Jesus offered in the synagogue that day, is from the sixty-first chapter of Isaiah and would have been familiar to the people of the congregation. After all, it promised the coming of someone who would bring relief – *relief* from the things that plague people and societies. Poverty, oppression, punishment, injury: there's no reason to believe these things plagued the Israelites anymore than lots of other peoples and nations. But certainly they did plague them. So it'd be no surprise that they'd remember this text perhaps even more than other passages from their Bible.

What's more, they likely had certain expectations of how such relief from the ills that plague might look. For those who are poor, good news might be that the rich get some recompense. For those who are being punished and imprisoned, release might involve the prison guards getting what's coming to them, and moreover the punishing powers and principalities to come apart, perhaps even in spectacular fashion. As for the oppressed going free, this sparks of revolution, a turning of the tables, or maybe even insurrection!

The people (naturally) spoke well of him after this, and were amazed. Basically, they had just learned that someone from their tiny town of Nazareth – with its population hovering in the few hundreds – was the anointed one of God. I mean, what are the odds? It'd be like finding out your first cousin won the Powerball lottery. \$1.5 billion! You're sure to see some of that!

But Jesus knew this was where their thinking would go. “You will say,” he said to them, “You will say, ‘Do here also in your home town the things that we have you did at Capernaum.’” But he wasn’t going to do that. He wasn’t going to do here among his family and extended family and close friends what he did in Capernaum. (We’re not sure what he did in Capernaum. Luke doesn’t tell us, but we can guess – a healing, an exorcism maybe.) Regardless, he wasn’t going to do any of that here. He was just going to preach, to introduce himself really, and then to be on his way.

Because, remember, there were many widows in Israel during the time of Elijah – and during that time of famine, these widows suffered likely first and most, as widows do. And there were many lepers in Israel during the time of Elisha – lepers who were cast out of society for their being possibly contagious, harmfully contagious. Regardless, Elijah saved the widow of Zarapheth, a Gentile, a woman of the Syrian city Sidon, instead of any, to say nothing of all, the widows of Israel. Likewise, Elisha saved Namaan, a Gentile, a Syrian, instead of any, to say nothing of all, the lepers of Israel. So, you know...

Apparently, the people of Nazareth did. Apparently they figured out the gist of what Jesus was saying – that they could expect the same of their prophet, their homegrown messiah. He would go out, even to the Gentiles, to heal the sick and to save the lost, to bring good news to the poor and release to the captives. He would go *out* to do all these things. In other words, the beneficiaries of this emissary of God’s jubilee and good news wouldn’t be they themselves, the good people of Nazareth, but some stranger out there, some swath of the larger society that didn’t deserve it at all, really maybe not at all. The Gentiles?

Luke is the only the Gentile writer of the whole Bible. Every other contributor to this library of books – sixty-six in all – is Jewish. Luke, the writer of this gospel and of the book, Acts of the Apostles, was quite likely a Gentile. This is the thought because Gentiles feature highly in these books. But whatever Luke’s motivations, it’s obvious there was a story there. Jesus would bring his message beyond the people Israel, would bring good news and healing to both Jews and Gentiles. It’s obvious because here we are. Included in a story that we have no right to be included in, taken into a family that

we have no birth-right to – except for God’s grace: the story of God-with-us is now ours to tell and moreover ours to live.

But, come on, these were the people who were doing Israel wrong. I mean, the Gentiles, the Syrians: these were people who deserved to fall away. After years of Roman occupation and the ever-present threat of force, after centuries of one empire after another coming in and taking over, the rules were always changing but it always meant the same for the Jews – that they couldn’t follow their own rules, and it was their *rules* who made them who they were; it was their *law* that made them the people of God. Take that away, and they were nothing.

And they were pretty damned tired of being nothing – which is why it would have been good news indeed if the anointed one of God were finally here, and were also *from* here, and at long last was ready to take care of business.

It’s not clear in the story when the people noticed what Jesus *didn’t* say. It’s clear that they went from amazement and praise to filled with rage around the time he interpreted the reading. “When they heard this,” this being Jesus mentioning the widow of Zarapheth and Naaman the Syrian: “When they heard this, they were all filled with rage...” and they got up and led him to a cliff that they could throw him off it.

Jesus got away, as we know. But it was perhaps during this suddenly violent move that the people of Nazareth came to realize that he hadn’t finished the reading. He hadn’t finished what Isaiah prophesied about this anointed one: that he was sent to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor *and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.*” He’d left that last part out.

But it would have been so satisfying, right? Really, this is the best way to comfort those who mourn – to see that those who cause us to mourn get what’s coming to them. After all, resentment is so much easier than mourning, and resentment needs its relief.

This week Sarah Palin endorsed Donald Trump in his run for the presidency. Her speech was a breathtaking display of nonsense and madness. It was also very effective – effective for it being highly emotional without any checks on such

heightened emotionality with reason, specificity, or sense of consequence. One line, in particular, scratches the itch that Tarantino does as well: “They stomp on our neck and then they tell us, ‘Just chill, okay? Just relax.’ Well, look, we are mad, and we’ve been had. They need to get used to it.”

Who is “we,” you wonder, and who is “they”? Who is the “they” that are stomping on necks, and who is the “we” getting stomped on? Because it’s not actually the case that anyone is getting their necks stomped on (unless we’re talking about race and policing tactics. But we’re not talking about that.) No, what Palin is calling forth is those who *feel* like their necks are getting stomped on, and if you *feel* this way then you’re in “we” that she means to defend (and if you’re *not* feeling this way, then you must be a stomper). What’s more, if you *feel* this way, then it’s actually happening. If you *feel* like you’re getting stomped on, then you *are* getting stomped on and, which means of course that there is a “they” who’s got their boot on your neck.

So, you’re right to be angry. You’re justified in wanting to stomp someone right back, or to whip someone to death, or to blow up a theater (you never know, Hitler might be inside), or to rip limb from limb everyone who just pisses you off, who stands for something you don’t like or who is emblematic of some social trend that you’re just not gonna take anymore. This is the right feeling for you to have and so is the right course of action for you to take, and if you’re not there yet, then we can provide someone to help you get there.

I mean, think about, haven’t you been wronged? And don’t you think it’s time you set things to right? We’re with you. We get it. Don’t you think it’s about time we all went after them and made them pay?

This is a diabolical thing to ask. Literally, this is diabolical, *diabolos* meaning in Greek “the one who divides” and also “slanderer, accuser.” This makes *diabolos* the Greek expression of the Hebrew *ha-satan*, which is why the diabolical and the satanic are often interchangeable in the New Testament.

As it happens, Jesus arrived in Nazareth that day having just emerged from the wilderness where the devil, the *diabolos*, had tempted him. He emerged victorious, having not played into this temptation, but instead, the narrative notes, “full of the

Holy Spirit.” Here the word for Holy Spirit connotes breath, *pneumatōs*, but elsewhere the Holy Spirit is understood as advocate, “to advocate” being a corrective to the diabolical “to accuse.”

The tricky thing about the diabolical, though; the tricky thing about the divisiveness that dominates so much of our public speech, our on-line exchange, our societal conversation, and our mass-entertainments: the tricky thing about “us” and “them” is that it *feels* so unifying. I almost never feel so “one” with a group as when I’m gathered against some opposing force or trend. And I’m smart. I’m good. So I can trust that the opposing force against which I stand with all these others is bad so this feeling of solidarity, of unity and oneness: this must be of and for the good.

Surely this is how the people of Nazareth felt when they came together to throw Jesus off a cliff. He was going to deny them the spirit by which they all huddled together in expectation that God would make their enemies pay, and so they would make him pay. Surely this is how they felt: solidarity, fraternity, brotherhood. You can’t throw a man off a cliff without some loyal and reliable help. And there was no coercion, here, no bribery. This was consensus: this was the right thing to do.

The tricky think about all this, too, is that there are evils in our midst that we are right to stand against. Tarantino is not wrong to take issue with Hitler. Palin isn’t wrong to call out corruption and complacency. The narratives of injury that we have lived and survived and now tell (“lest we forget”) aren’t things that we should just get over or put in the past or quit making such a big deal of. What has caused you suffering, what has caused me pain, what has caused any and all of us humiliation and fear, heartbreak and sorrow: we have a right, and a responsibility, and most of all a psychological need to give these things voice.

But there’s also this – that we have grace and blessing to hold these experiences of injury in the light of consciousness and prayerfulness. What’s more, we have the Holy Spirit by which to take gracious and forceful action in the hope of correction, in the hope of setting things to right. This is what “re-surrection” means, after all: setting to right. Hear it as related to insurrection, but also quite different. An insurrection is a violent uprising, if done in the hope of justice; resurrection is a setting things to right,

justice made real.

It's simple, really, if challenging: we just need to be very careful, and deeply discerning, of what spirit animates these processes we undertake. Is it one that, given half the chance, would rip limb from limb (which, let's face it, would be very satisfying) or one that would bind limb to limb (which, let's face it, sounds pretty difficult and discomfiting, but might also at some point bring blessed surprise)? Is it one whose last stop is resentment that at least affirms how right we are to feel this way, or is the aim forgiveness for the sake of reconciliation, however far off such a thing might feel at the time?

Shortly after *Django Unchained* came out, the clowns of *Saturday Night Live* produced a spoof, a movie trailer for a new film. The voiceover starts, "Get ready for the ultimate historical revenge fantasy," and a figure rolling away a stone lets sunlight spill into the cave, which silhouettes his own head, crowned as it is with a laurel of thorns. The sun on his face now, he utters in a throaty growl, "Guess who's back." The film title appears then, *Jesus Uncrossed*, and the voiceover takes it from there: "He's risen from the dead, and he's preaching anything but forgiveness. He may be wearing sandals but he can still kick ass." With that Jesus unsheathes a sword that'd been strapped to his back, just behind the cross he was yet made to carry (though this, I imagine, to stoke his resentment: "Never forget what they did to you!") and with the sword he takes out a whole Roman imperial guard, the leader the last to die. He gets in one more quip, "Jesus H. Christ!" and as Jesus raises his sword over the Roman's head, he says in that snappy, American movie-dialogue way, "The 'H' is silent." Then he chops him in half and blood spurts cartoonishly.

As for when he comes across Judas Iscariot, he cocks his semiautomatic and says, "When you get to heaven, say hi to my dad."

I stumbled on this on the web around Easter last year, so I posted it to some clergy friends' Facebook walls. "Happy Easter!" I said to them. "You know, it could have gone like this." But then I found out that, when it first aired a few years ago, some Christian groups found it offensive. How dare they make fun of our Christ! (I felt really bad about posting it, lest my friends get in trouble with their congregations.)

But, no, was my thought. They're not making fun of our Christ. They're preaching our Christ by using the currency of our day to highlight the radical nature of what Christ *actually* means. They're doing as good a job preaching the gospel of God's love and forgiveness as all us preachers are – and they're apparently having a lot of fun, too. The joke's on Tarantino. The joke's on Palin. These clowns of *SNL*: they get it. There's nothing edgy about stoking resentment and seeking revenge. That's as commonplace as can be. What's edgy is not stopping at resentment but moving (however slowly, however painfully) toward acceptance, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Of course, see Tarantino's films, if you like. I know lots of people who admire them – and these are people whom I admire. This isn't some line in the sand that I've drawn. No, for that would be to miss my own preaching point. One body, many members: Tarantino fans and not-so-much.

As for fans of Sarah Palin, I'll get there, I hope.

Thanks be to God.