

**Are You Persecuting God?
The Reverend James S. Ward.**

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Are you persecuting God? A strange question.

Usually we tend to think of God persecuting us. "Why me, Lord?" Even theology seems governed by or obsessed by the question. Where is God when we suffer?

Something there must be, that we have done that sentences us to suffer? Something there is about our suffering that must be just. I've been around long enough to recognize the question that so often comes in one way or another. But "why me?" often masks a deeper question or suspicion: "What have I done to deserve this?" Sometimes it takes a different form, "Why was this person taken and not me?"

It has a kind of religious logic or calculus associated with it. Security for us is connected to some kind of transactional equivalency. "What is the value of a life?" the psalmist asks. "What can I give for my life?" It reminds me of Hemingway's old man fishing out beyond the safety of the shore who hooks the big one promising God, "If you'll just let me land this fish, I'll say X number of Hail Mary's."

That transactional or evaluative logic also operates at the level of our public discourse, as well. In yesterday's Chronicle I was struck by the headline above the story about the battlefield death in Afganistan of Pat Tillman who left a promising career with the NFL Arizona Cardinals after 9-11 to enlist as an elite Ranger in the US Army. Here was a hero the headline, "Face of Sacrifice," seemed to be saying worthy of our grief and emulation.

It's the same logic as we are used to from the atonement transaction which the film "Passion of the Christ" seems to be pushing. This infinitely loving and forgiving man is worthy to become the substitutionary payment for our sins. God's justice can only be satisfied by the death of His own Son and our job is to receive the fruit of this transaction by faith, by believing Christ died for our sins. But I fear that doing this reinforces our expectations of retribution and our requirement for retributive justice. That is, it reinforces our suspicion that sin must be paid for and if we are suffering, it must be because we have, or someone has, sinned.

I want to challenge this foundational assumption of much of what passes for Christian religion, especially among our evangelical and fundamentalist brothers and sisters. Perhaps more foolhardy of me, I want to suggest that we have misunderstood and misinterpreted Paul whose conversion we read today.

In this famous passage from Acts, Jesus appears to Paul (then called Saul) on the road to Damascus. But Jesus doesn't match Saul's "fiery threats" with threats of his own. He doesn't even, like we might expect him to from our knowledge of his earlier preaching, say something like "The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news." Nor does he take a different tack, one we might advise if Saul's conversion were foremost in his mind. He doesn't ask Saul, "Why don't you believe that I am the Messiah?" It's not faith he seems to be looking for from Paul.

Instead he says something very curious, indeed. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And when Saul, unable to see him because he is blinded by the surrounding bright light, responds, "Who are you, Lord," he doesn't reply "I am Jesus who died for your sins." But oddly, he says, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."

Well, of course, this is the source of one of St. Paul's most revolutionary insights: the idea that the Church, the gathered followers of the Way, is the risen "Body of Christ." But something even more radical, so much so that we are likely to miss it because we assume we already know what is going on, is being shown here. Jesus reveals himself by touching his wounds in a way that faces the one to whom he reveals himself with their own complicity in Jesus suffering. But if you think about it all of the resurrection appearances have this same context, the context of the guilt of the one to whom the risen Christ appears. What else can Jesus' "fear not" mean?

Today's gospel passage makes this point by reminding us of the other great conversion story of the New Testament. It's the story of Peter, a man who betrayed his closest friend to death; and then when this friend appeared to him risen as forgiveness without any recrimination or blame, he was moved to revise his entire life. Here the risen Lord calls to Peter and the other disciples out on the Lake and he calls them from before a charcoal fire. Yet it was before just such a fire, only a few days earlier in the courtyard of the high priest, that Peter had denied that he even knew Jesus. We are all painfully familiar with that fire.

Every story of conversion is some version of this scary and wonderful recognition that the God we had feared and hidden from because of our betrayal and our persecution of Him reveals himself to us in Christ's resurrection as inexhaustible love and forgiveness, as the mercy that begets in us mercy for others.

Some of you have heard me tell about my own self-righteous and moralistic betrayal of my friend and colleague Gail Greenwell. Last year when we were in a serious financial crisis and, even though she wanted nothing more than to continue here at St. Stephen's, it began to look like we were not going to be able to keep Gail's position. It was then that I took it

upon myself to look out for her. I called the executive officer of the diocese and explained our predicament and asked him to keep Gail in mind as jobs around the diocese came open.

So full of paternalistic magnanimity was I that I failed to consult with Gail until after making this phone call. When I finally did, it became painfully clear that I had overstepped my responsibility and had, in fact, betrayed Gail's dignity. It was a painfully purgative moment of recognition for me. But I was disabused of my presumption in the most gracious and forgiving manner, that this moment, added to so many others like it, has built the foundation for an expectation of meeting the risen, merciful Christ in the ongoing demands on our working relationship.

Encountering the risen Christ each week as we do revealed in this eucharistic meal, it is at that same fire. Here Jesus takes the occasion of our violent betrayal of him in others in whom he is present and turns it into the story of our merciful redemption. From the fire of fear and retributive justice our betrayal of God has been transformed into the fire of love, mercy and forgiveness.

This is how T.S. Eliot puts it in his poem Little Gidding, the fourth of his Four Quartets. He begins by making a reference to the Holy Spirit:

The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare
The one discharge from sin and error.
The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre—
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.

By revisiting week by week the fire of this transformation and by overcoming our fear of being exposed to its light, we can more and more become expectant of God's mercy and forgiveness. And depending on that mercy instead of on our worthiness or our earned value before God, we can begin to wean ourselves from the need for a God who punishes sin

through suffering. Being weaned of a persecuting God can help us to disengage from participation the conflagration of persecution that threatens to consume the world.

When Paul tells the story of his conversion, he always does so to make the point that he as the persecutor of Christ was the “worst of sinners.” Yet he doesn’t do this in order to brag but so that all of us hearing him may come to recognize our own small betrayals and persecutions of God, in ways maybe more subtle or nuanced than those of Paul’s “breathing threats and murder.” It’s really only in discovering ourselves to be persecutors of God that God can make himself known to us in all his redeeming work.

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