

Doubt

Good Friday Reflection

April 14, 2017

Betrayer. Betrayed. It's not always easy to tell who is who.

In 1987 I found myself in a rather unexpected place: at a local clergy meeting in Palo Alto, California. It was part of my grand attempt to fit in with what I thought of as the "Christian church."

I was a brand new, totally unprepared pastor of a small Metropolitan Community Church near Palo Alto. It was only after I'd accepted their call, quit my job in Seattle, and moved to California that I learned that the church was basically a hobby for a few wealthy men, and no one in the congregation felt a need to actually show up more than twice a year. Sitting alone in my office day after day, I felt isolated and alone, and I sought out a clergy group in the hope that associating with other pastors would help me feel more secure in my position and my identity as a pastor.

Unbeknownst to me, the topic of the clergy meeting that day was ministering to people with AIDS. The crisis was near its peak in the Bay Area in those days, and even ministers in churches that didn't intentionally reach out to "those kinds of people" found themselves confronting the disease on a regular basis. About 10 clergy gathered in a nondescript room while a representative from a local AIDS support group spoke, and then offered to answer questions.

A middle-aged woman raised her hand, and I'll never forget what she said. "You know, every time I see someone with AIDS in the hospital I can't help but feel that they deserve it." The speaker was appalled, and sputtered a response. The woman glared back at him. No one else said a word. I have only vague memories of the rest of the meeting, and quite frankly I couldn't get out of there fast enough.

It is important to understand that in 1987, we had no effective treatments for HIV. Young men I knew and ministered to were dying at a rate of one or two a week, and the survivors constantly wondered when it would be their turn to go. All of us were overwhelmed and frightened, and eventually angry. And much of

society didn't seem to care. Many, like the clergy woman I mentioned, thought we had it coming.

I never went back to that clergy support group.

The meeting, in fact, was another step toward the end of my idyllic dreams of what it would be like to be a pastor, an ending that eventually cast doubt on even being a "Christian." I began to doubt the intentions of "the church," not just my little congregation but the "Church" with a capital C. And eventually my disillusionment expanded past the church to God. What kind of God would believe that people deserved to die of AIDS? What kind of God would tolerate followers who so often sounded and acted cruel and sanctimonious? What kind of God would call me into such an intolerable ministry?

First came Doubts. Then Disgust. And then Disinterest.

Doubt. Disgust. Disinterest. For years, those feelings dominated my spiritual core. I had no use for religion, and certainly didn't consider myself a Christian. My negative feelings grew and festered, leaving no room for faith or anything positive.

I know that some people close to me worried that I had betrayed my faith, turned my back on the church, and had run away from Jesus just like the disciples in the gospel story. But that's not how it felt to me.

From my vantage point, I was the one who'd been betrayed.

Betrayer. Betrayed. It's not always easy to tell who is who.