

Death's Disguises
Mark 14:12–15:39

“The wages of sin is death.”
Romans 6:23

Pay attention, for a moment, to death's disguises, to the way death separates and the stealth by which death divides us one from another, in the story of Christ's Passion: “So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.” *Treachery*. “You will all become deserters.” *Abandonment*. “He came and found them sleeping.” *Indifference*. “. . . he went up to him at once and said, ‘Rabbi!’ and kissed him.” *Deceit*. “All of them deserted him and fled.” *Fear*. “For many gave false testimony against him.” *Lying*. “But he denied it . . . again he denied it . . . he began to curse and he swore an oath.” *Cowardice*. “They bound him, led him away, and handed him over.” *Falsehood*. “Crucify him! Crucify him!” *Hatred*. “So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd released Barabbas . . .” *Duplicity*. “They derided him . . . mocked him . . . taunted him.” *Contempt*.

Death disguises are, even now, at work destroying the humanity within each of us and the humanity between all of us, killing the persons we were created to be long before any of us end up six feet under. The wages of sin, Paul famously said, is death. That is to say, death's categorical disguise in life is the sin, the unrighteousness and so the betrayal of the basically human in us and between us that destroys our life in community. If the Bible's central moral category is righteousness, which Robert Jenson defines as “the vigor of the entire network of communal relations within which participants divine and human live,” then “Scripture's many words for sin are mere contraries of ‘righteousness’ and denote one or another betrayal of community.”

As concerns the communal relations within which humans live, you can read the story of Scripture, from the beginning in one garden to the denouement in another garden, as the story of death threatening the right relationships for which we were made. Mythically, the *lying* of the serpent to Eve in Eden, the *jealousy* of Cain for Abel, the *wickedness* of humankind before the flood, the *hubris* of Noah's offspring after the flood, the *rivalry* among Jacob's sons, the *enslavement* of God's people. On and on the story goes until we come to the beginning of history as we know it, when God's people demanded a king other than God and the *sins* of the nation's subsequent kings finally divided the kingdom, multiplied injustice, and sent God's people into exile. Death's disguises dividing us one from another and wrecking human community.

As concerns the communal relations within which divine participants live, you can read the story of Scripture as the history of God with us, a history “decisively shaped by our betrayal of the ‘with us’” that reaches its zenith or its null point on Golgotha. Christ's Passion decisively concentrates all of death's little separations and minor triumphs into one week, its characters used to concentrate the assault of death precisely on God with us. And lest you think this is a story about “them back there” or even “them as opposed to us,” think again. Like Judas who “began to look for an opportunity to betray him” so we look for every opportunity to convince ourselves that our liberal or conservative causes are an improvement on following him to the cross. *Treachery*. Like the disciples who “all become deserters,” so we all have deserted him whenever discipleship threatens the life we choose to live without him. *Abandonment*. Just as “they were found sleeping” on that fateful night so Jesus comes and finds us weary in our well-doing after one day of marching. *Indifference*. Like him who betrayed Jesus with a kiss so our outward piety masks our inward rejection of God's claim upon our lives. *Deceit*. Like those who “deserted him and fled,” we are running still from this Teacher who insists we lose our lives if ever we are going to find them. *Fear*. Like the many who “gave false testimony against him,” so we are complicit as we shrug at

our lives awash in untruth. *Lying*. Like Peter who “denied...and again denied...and then began to curse and swear an oath,” so each of us, having grown too weak to stand for something, least of all for the love that never quits, fall for anything. *Cowardice*. Like those who “bound him, led him away, and handed him over,” we have bound and handed over his word to disbelief by our sophisticated ways of knowing. *Falsehood*. “Crucify him! Crucify him!” is our cry against him who threatens our zero-sum game of privilege fueled by self-loathing. *Hatred*. Like Pilate “wishing to satisfy the crowd...” we seek to please the tribes that define us and divide us. *Duplicity*. Like the bystanders who “derided him...mocked him...taunted him” we do the same as we deride, mock and taunt those whom he so loved. *Contempt*. Death’s disguises separating us from God and betraying God with us.

But here is the thing that undid me as I stopped writing this sermon to listen to young people from all over the country in Washington pleading for their lives. Because of their elders’ complicity in the betrayal of the entire network of communal relations in this nation, because of my generation’s embrace of gun violence as the way things are and will always be in this country, because our national debate concerning their future majors in treachery, abandonment, indifference, deceit, fear, lying, cowardice, falsehood, hatred, duplicity, and contempt, death has no need to disguise itself in this society. To wit: the President could “walk down Fifth Avenue and shoot someone and nothing would come of it.” Far from being disguised in this nation, death is blatant, bald-faced, barefaced, shameless and bolstered by our sin, our unrighteousness, our betrayal of God with us.

Though something else undid me more: death’s ubiquity. Young person after young person--siblings of children killed in Newtown, teenagers whose friends die day after day on the streets of Chicago and Los Angeles, youth locked-down in the closets of Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School--each spoke not only of the dead, but of their own lives now in the thrall of death’s traumatic aftermath. “If the bullet that killed my brother Ricardo in South LA did not kill me,” Edna Chavez said, “the anxiety and trauma will. I carry that trauma everywhere I go.” 267 tee shirts on our front lawn in November, 22 portraits of Souls Shot, five more killed this week by guns in Philadelphia multiplied by mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, classmates and neighbors whose lives are forever marked by death’s assault on their lives too. Two hundred dead in school shootings since Columbine but also 187,000 students attending 193 primary and secondary schools forever marked by their deaths. 26,000 children and teens under 18 shot and killed on the streets of our cities since Columbine, death stalking their families and friends until they lie to die. Who will deliver us from this body of death?

At the end of the story we will tell each other this week, with all the authority of the state, the silence of politicians, and the blessing of the religious community, death will also take off its disguise and murder the Lord of Life. “What makes death the Lord’s enemy, and fearful for us,” Jens says at the end, is that “death undoes love,” even God’s love for his son, his only son, the beloved. “Why have you forsaken me?” Jesus cries. Death undoes love because “to love is to live from hopes invested in the other.” Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. That is how the story ends today, leaving us to live this week with eyes wide open to the consequences of death’s triumph, for that is how we *do* live day after day and night after night; that is how we will continue to live. Unless it should happen that love and not death is our destiny.