

To Suffer, or to Cause Suffering

First of all, I want to let all of us off the hook today about one thing. Even though there are powerful lessons in this story about money and monetary obligations, certainly picked up on later by Paul in Romans and by Peter in First Peter, what I want to focus on here in this story today are, first, the setting, and second, the cast of characters.

The setting is Jerusalem, where Jesus had predicted he would meet a violent end. Specifically, the setting is in the Temple, the home turf of the Pharisees, who were determined to bring Jesus to that very violent end!

Remember that there, in the Temple, Jesus had already summarily dismissed the entire system of righteousness as ascribed to by the Pharisees – a righteousness earned through strict adherence to law and custom. Through parable and teaching, Jesus had already identified the Scribes and Pharisees as exactly the ones who would destroy the Son. And time and time again already, Jesus had adroitly sidestepped their hostility and turned their own clever interrogation on themselves.

As a result of all this, the Pharisees left the temple, perhaps sensing somehow it was not good to do their plotting there, and hatched a scheme to bring Jesus down. They entered into a sort of devil's bargain with the Herodians who were the ruling secular political party, and put in place their twisted conspiracy.

When they returned to the Temple, they approached Jesus and launched the conspiracy with flattery. What they said about Jesus, to his very face, was all true enough, but Jesus saw through their flattery perfectly. Jesus, the text says, was "aware of their malice." Jesus knew they wanted to make him suffer. Which, unbeknownst to them, would indeed happen, and would turn out to make the craziest kind of sense in the end. Compared to them, Jesus had in fact come to Jerusalem to suffer. What a difference between the two!

A difference that to this day heaps judgment upon every human effort to make others suffer. A difference that leaves no place for any one of us to stand in this story other than with the Pharisees and Herodians! And yet, a difference that makes it altogether too clear the way for us to go from here.

It is not now, never has been, and never will be, for human beings to choose whether or not to suffer. We all suffer at some time, in some way. That is a given. But there is now for us, as followers not of Pharisees and Herodians, but of Jesus Christ, the crucified and resurrected One, to choose not to make others suffer.

Jesus' suffering brings salvation even to Pharisees and Herodians, and therefore even to us, as well. Jesus' suffering gives new and rich and deep meaning to all human suffering, especially that wrought upon one human being by another. Jesus' suffering can, and should, lift the veil off of the various and many ways, big or little, in which we cause others to suffer; whether by sheer individual force of power, or by our place of privilege within a system that depends upon the suffering of some.

And when we go this Table today, we will be reminded in stark terms of the suffering that Jesus went to Jerusalem to fulfill. So, when we go to this Table today, let us also go seeking the mercy and help we need to stop making others suffer, and instead, to enter into their suffering with them, as Jesus has done for us.