

TGIF

On July 24, 1973 a restaurant opened in the Galleria area in Houston that took the city by storm. It was called TGI Fridays and seven astronauts led by Alan Shepard attended the grand opening.

It was not the first TGI Fridays to open. The first was in New York, opened by an unmarried New York City perfume salesman named Alan Stillman who decided that the coolest way to meet the stewardesses in his neighborhood would be to buy a broken down beer joint, jazz it up with Tiffany lamps and mod young waiters and christen it – with an eye toward attracting the career crowd – the TGIF (Thank God It's Friday) crowd. Within one week the police had to ring Friday's (as it quickly became known) with barricades to handle the nightly hordes of young singles.

The next restaurant with this name was opened in Memphis, Tennessee and the next one was opened in Dallas. These three were bringing in millions of dollars of revenue. Few eating establishments have ever opened to such huge success.

This was before the era of the internet and computer dating. TGI Fridays was the place for single people to meet and connect. One of their advertising slogans was "where the singles mingle." It was in Houston that the restaurant introduced what would become one of its signature dishes – loaded potato skins.

The restaurant developed the custom of celebrating the beginning of Friday at midnight on Thursday. I never was there for such an event but the reports are that every Thursday at midnight was like New Year's Eve.

The chain became a huge success. I can remember in the early 70s waiting at long as 45 minutes for a table. The entertainment was to sit at a table on the periphery of the restaurant and watch people at the bar making out. That original Houston restaurant is, of course, no longer. Not even the geography is the same as it was then. And, like many successful franchises, when their originators sell them off for a huge profit, they soon fell out of the extreme popularity they once had. There are only two TGI Fridays in the Houston area.

(There is an entire entry in wikipedia about this restaurant chain - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T.G.I._Friday's)

Maybe the founder of Fridays was on to something when he named the restaurant. After all the word "Friday" is derived from a word that has to do with love and lovers.

We humans are an odd lot when it comes to referring to days of the week. We thank God it is Friday because the work week is about over. We call Wednesday "hump day" because that signifies a downhill slide to the weekend. And, there are a higher percentage of heart attacks that occur between 8 and 10 on Monday morning than at any other time. That is to say, we can give an interpretation to a day of the week that will kill us.

Speaking of killing -

I have been using what is known as "the last week" in the Jesus story to guide me in writing these talks. We are up to the day, Friday, when Jesus is killed, executed.

How we can end up, at the religious and spiritual level, saying "Thank God It's Friday"?

I will read to you part of Mark's version and then we'll talk about - both today and next Sunday.

* * *

At dawn's first light, the high priests, with the religious leaders and scholars, arranged a conference with the entire Jewish Council. After tying Jesus securely, they took him out and presented him to Pilate.

Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

He answered, "If you say so." The high priests let loose a barrage of accusations.

Pilate asked again, "Aren't you going to answer anything? That's quite a list of accusations." Still he said nothing. Pilate was impressed, really impressed.

It was a custom at the Feast to release a prisoner, anyone the people asked for. There was one prisoner called Barabbas, locked up with the insurrectionists, who had committed murder during the uprising against Rome. As the crowd came up and began to present its petition for him to release a prisoner, Pilate anticipated them: "Do you want me to release the King of the Jews to you?" Pilate knew by this time that it was through sheer spite that the high priests had turned Jesus over to him.

But the high priests by then had worked up the crowd to ask for the release of Barabbas. Pilate came back, "So what do I do with this man you call King of the Jews?"

They yelled, "Nail him to a cross!"

Pilate objected, "But for what crime?"

But they yelled all the louder, "Nail him to a cross!"

Pilate gave the crowd what it wanted, set Barabbas free and turned Jesus over for whipping and crucifixion.

The soldiers took Jesus into the palace (called Praetorium) and called together the entire brigade. They dressed him up in purple and put a crown plaited from a thorn bush on his head. Then they began their mockery: "Bravo, King of the Jews!"

They banged on his head with a club, spit on him, and knelt down in mock worship. After they had had their fun, they took off the purple cape and put his own clothes back on him. Then they marched out to nail him to the cross.

(Mark 15:1-21)

* * *

I hope you remember that several months ago when we talked about "the first Christmas," I said that those stories were parables created by the early followers of Jesus. They wanted a birth story that competed with those told about Caesar and other "human divine" figures.

Further, in our popular culture the two very different birth stories get squished together to create one story. And, because, the only way most people hear these stories is through popular culture, they have not only come to accept them as factually true - not

parables - but also people come to think they know the story.

Just so with the story of "the last week." Through things like Mel Gibson's "The Passion of The Christ," the current movie "Son of God," other pop television offerings that are offered up around the Easter season to say nothing of Bill O'Rilley's monstrosity "Killing Jesus," people are exposed to misstatements, inaccuracies and fabrications that leave them with the belief that they know the story.

By the way, there is nothing in any versions of the story about a long-eared, cotton-tailed creature - chocolate or otherwise - who lays colored eggs for children to find on Easter morning or who leaves baskets overflowing with goodies. Easter in our culture, just like Christmas, has come to mean commercial excess.

The only way anyone can talk about the "seven last words" Jesus spoke from the cross is to squish the stories together. In Mark, Jesus says only one thing: "My God, My God! Why have you forsaken me?"

Jesus came onto the scene concerned about the lives of people who were without power and who lived under an unjust domination system. He spoke out against that and what he got for his efforts was execution.

I don't know how you see things but, as I see it, we seem to be moving into a more granulated, judgmental, violent and divisive culture. Just this week I read a report that "millennials" are spending as many as 18 hours a day skimming the Web, watching TV, texting, playing video games, and using social media. Many of these young people do two or three of these activities at the same time, which the study counts individually.

Nonetheless, we live in a culture of massive distraction.

(Cartoon - still working on charging that phone?)

I think of something I read years ago while in my training: "We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are." (Anais Nin)

I have these two precious grandchildren, to say nothing about my love for you. I'm concerned about their future. And yours. And mine.

Every day in this country 20 children are hospitalized for injuries caused by firearms. 3,000 of these die before they can get to a hospital. A recent New Yorker cartoon reflects what I think are our distorted values regarding this. A father has his young daughter at a gun shop. They are considering buying her a rifle. The dealer says, "Careful - some of our children's firearms are manufactured in plants that also process nuts and nut products."

Climate change, be you liberal or conservative, is giving these grand-children, as well as the rest of us, a questionable future.

Political rhetoric, some of it passed off as "I was just making a joke," is getting more ignorant and irresponsible.

The amount of gun violence in PG-13 movies has more than tripled since 1985, according to a new study in the journal "Pediatrics".

Point: we live in a violent culture.

Jesus taught a message, his followers called it "good news," of non-violence. Yet, amazingly, astoundingly the very message he died to illustrate has been turned into one that has created not only a violent religion but a brutal and brutalizing God.

Prior to the first quarter of the fourth century it would have been unthinkable for a follower of Jesus to carry a weapon, bear arms or participate in violent activity. This is not my opinion. This is factually true.

Then, somehow, Christianity came not only to endorse but to inaugurate some of the most violent activity on the planet. How did this come to be? It came to be because of a massive misunderstanding of the death of Jesus.

I cannot stress this strong enough, especially about, "the Last Week." This is not history! It is, rather, history remembered.

So, what is the history that is being remembered here?

Remember how I have been stressing that the various Jesus stories we have, and this is especially true of this version of "the last week," were told and then written to serve two purposes: educational and liturgical.

Educational in that by now it is decades after the death of Jesus. The community of those who had become "followers of the way" was not only growing like crazy but also this community, because it was continuing the non-violent protest against the domination system of the Roman Empire, was undergoing intense persecution.

Liturgical in that these followers were mostly Jewish and, as such, they brought the Jewish genius for liturgy into the Jewish synagogue worship they continued but reshaped it somewhat to fit their new beliefs and understandings of what it meant to fulfill what Jesus had referred to as "the law and the prophets."

The Jews had developed a mythology to deal with the most difficult issue any religion, or any person, ever has to deal with - the problem of evil and suffering in the world.

Up until the time of monotheism, people explained evil as coming from an evil deity. But, in Judaism it was forbidden to have other gods and the presence of evil in the world couldn't be attributed to God.

So, the Jews created a myth to explain the presence of evil and suffering. It was the Garden of Eden myth. This myth said that we humans were created perfect but then we went sour. The way things went sour was, of course, by a woman. The woman, not as wise or as human as the perfect man, displayed her weakness by giving in to the temptation from the snake. She seduced Adam into also doing what was forbidden, thus labeling women forever as troublemakers.

Imperfect people cannot, of course, live in a perfect world so they were kicked out of Eden.

To this day this myth affects and infects us. We are defined as sinful and fallen.

The Jews assumed that if the break between God and humans was to be restored, it could only come from God's side. Humans had been banished from God's presence. Humans were in bondage to sin that they had

brought upon themselves and could only be rescued by God. Unable to save ourselves we required a savior.

All of this mythology eventually worked its way into Jewish liturgy and developed into something called The Day of Atonement. The word "atonement" comes from putting together the words "at," "one" and "meant" meaning "with." Or, "at one with."

This is the lens through which the early tellers of the Jesus story saw and explained his death.

In Jewish theology people were created perfect but then messed that up. They couldn't save themselves. That would have to come from God. The first thing God did to remedy this problem was to give Jews "the law" to follow. The demands of the law, however, proved more than any life could achieve. So, God gave to the Jewish people "the prophets." The prophets were to recall the wayward people to their original purpose. But, people didn't listen to the prophets.

So, next came Jewish liturgy. The Jewish religious leaders came up with a day of celebration called "the Day of Atonement." This liturgy taught people to identify themselves as sinful people separated from God. Yet, at the same time they were created in God's image and must yearn for restoration. This is the language of Yom Kippur that Christians use today to describe both an understanding of themselves and the nature of God.

The Day of Atonement is the highest day in Jewish worship. It is probably the most powerful single item in Jewish liturgy. It is a day of penitence for which people were to prepare rigorously. You can see the roots of the Christian season of Lent in this.

The liturgy involved two animals that were chosen with care. These animals were a sheep and a goat - both males because males were more highly valued than females. They had to be physically perfect because they were to represent the perfection the people yearned to have.

The high priest took the lamb - which was called "the lamb of God" - and slaughtered it. The priest would take the blood of the lamb and go into what was called "the Holy of Holies" where God was thought to dwell and on "the mercy seat" where God was thought to sit the priest would smear the "blood of the lamb." Some of these phrases sound familiar?

Access to God had been opened by the blood of the perfect lamb.

Then the priest would come out from this place to where the people were gathered and he would sprinkle the blood of the Lamb of God on these people. They were thus "washed in the blood of the Lamb." That's where that phrase comes from.

Get the picture? Returning to the time before the fall was celebrated liturgically, symbolically. Not literally!

A second animal, the goat, was brought to the priest. People gathered around while the high priest, his hands holding the horns of the goat, began to pray expressing the people's sinfulness. In these prayers it was believed that the sins came out of the people leaving them clean. They were no longer separated from God by evil. When their sins left them they were believed to land on the head and back of the goat who was now called "the sin bearer."

This goat, now burdened by the sins of the people, became the object of people's wrath and anger. People called for the death of the goat because no one so evil should be allowed to live. But the goat was not killed. Rather, he was run out of the assembly of people into the wilderness carrying the sins of the people with it. The cleansed people were left, at least in this liturgical moment, with the sinless condition that marked human life at creation.

The Lamb of God had then died for the sins of the people and the sin-bearing goat had taken away the sins of the people. Everybody knew that this was a great liturgical drama.

This liturgy shaped the way Jesus followers processed their experience of the death of Jesus. This is why Jesus came to be called "the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." It is what made it possible for them to say "Jesus died for our sins." This is why the tellers of the Jesus stories portray the crowd heaping curses on Jesus and crying for his death. Every Jewish soul who followed Jesus and who first heard the story of his death and the Jewish explanation of it would have understood this story symbolically, liturgically and not literally.

But, when people began to move away from the Jewish liturgical genius and began to deal with the death of Jesus in a legalistic and literal way, it turned God into divine child abuser; a being so incapable of forgiving that this god demands punishment. So it became that God's divine Son absorbed the wrath of God for us. In this theology Jesus becomes the ultimate victim and those who worship him become saddled with the guilt of being responsible for his death.

This depiction of God is not even as good as what human parents do for their children.

It is important, in my opinion, that we have a correct understanding of the death of Jesus. Because, we become like the God we worship. If we have a violent God, we become a violent people.

Religion in its various manifestations has existed since the dawn of human consciousness. During that time religion has served two very important functions.

Religion has served to create meaning at the dualistic level. Religion offers myths, stories and rituals that help the ego make sense of and endure what it means to be human. This function of religion does not usually or even necessarily change the level of consciousness in a person. In itself it does not deliver radical transformation. It consoles the ego, fortifies the ego, defends the ego and promotes the ego. This is not necessarily bad but it can go bad quickly. You can look almost anywhere in the world and see the results of people confusing this function of religion with the finished product. It always ends up in a disaster, a battle of some sort - either in the outer world or the inner.

Again, if religion has a God who is violent and angry, one who can kill his own child, then the adherents of this religion come to believe, "If God can act this way, so can I."

I remember when I was in seminary reading about the wonderful John Calvin. He was a major leader of the Protestant Reformation. I was stunned to read about how Calvin, who so influenced Protestant Christianity, especially what we call the Presbyterian tradition, watched in delight while one of his theological

opponents, Michael Servetus, a Spanish physician and theologian, burned at the stake.

These two men exchanged letters for a while each trying to convince the other of his opinion. It turned bitter. Years passed. One day Severtus showed up in Geneva and went to church where Calvin was preaching. Calvin had him arrested, Calvin ran the town, and had Servetus burned alive while Calvin watched.

Here is a psychological law as certain as the law of gravity: People whose self-definition is that they are "evil" or "sinful" almost invariably respond to that definition by victimizing others. This is why Fundamentalists can portray those who are not responsive to their message as bound for an eternity of suffering.

This has also led to an over-emphasis on the ego and its behavior as a definition of who we are. All of this, and more, come - I believe - from a definition of humanity as so irreparably evil that Jesus had to die to rescue us from our hopeless state.

Just for the record, the substitutionary theory of the atonement did not enter Christian theology until the 11th century with the writings of Anselm of Canterbury. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_influence_theory_of_atonement)

I don't know how to say this any clearer: the theory of substitutionary atonement is not in the Bible. It was not the Jewish understanding of Jesus. The only way one can read it into the Bible is to become oblivious to how Jews understood and handled their own Sacred texts and to forget the historical context in which Mark, as well as the other early stories were put together.

A few weeks ago I introduced you to a word, it is a Hebrew word meaning "interpretation." The word is Midrash. When those who first were telling the Jesus story much of what they were doing was Midrash. That is to say, they took an event in the life of Jesus and then went into their Hebrew Scriptures to find its meaning. In the process they created stories that explained to them how Jesus made sense to them.

Just like the birth stories, the stories of the end of Jesus life came late. The scholars I trust say that it is clear that the earliest followers of Jesus seemed to have known nothing of the final events of Jesus' life. The earliest written documents we have about the Christian movement lack any account of Jesus' death or anything surrounding it. Early Christian art depicts Jesus as a healer, teacher and table companion. Christian art depicting the crucifixion came only much later.

When you compare the various accounts of Jesus last days, just like the birth stories, there are tremendous variations and contradictions. There was a fairly stable tradition of Jesus's teachings and deeds. The passion accounts appear to be very fluid - another indication of their late origin.

In Jesus, his early followers had experienced God in ways that transformed their lives. We'll talk about the vibrancy of the early movement during the first few centuries when we get to talking about the resurrection. What they knew was that his death couldn't mean defeat or shame. It must have meaning and significance.

So they searched the scriptures and found many texts that deal with a righteous one who suffers on behalf of others. Turning to the prophets and Psalms they found

verse after verse that could be taken out of context and strung together to form a coherent story of Jesus' suffering and death. The result was the story we have today.

This is not a dishonest way of writing. It was called Midrash. It was using Hebrew texts and interpreting them in terms of contemporary events.

My purpose is not to debunk or dismiss this story. Quite the contrary.

One of my purposes is to contribute to religious literacy. I want people to know the truth about this story at the information and factual level.

Another purpose is that this knowing contribute to our spiritual growth.

If someone were to ask me if I thought Jesus died for my sins my answer would be, "No, I don't think Jesus thought of his life or his purpose that way."

I do, however, have faith in the cross and this is what I mean by that: I see the cross as showing the defeat of the powers, as the revelation of the "way" of transformation. I see the cross as a call for me to live my life with as much integrity as he did. The original meaning of "believe" was not to believe a set of doctrines or teachings but, rather, to give your heart to something. Believing in Jesus, or in anything about his story, means to give one's heart to both the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, who shows us how to live the love of God.

The theology of our culture, because our religion is consumerism, is success, win, come out on top, dominate, be the best, etc.

The theology of the cross is the theology of descent. You've heard the saying: Religion is for those who are afraid of hell. Spirituality is for those who have been there. That is to say, it is only those who have drunk deeply of life's difficulties, who have gone through some sort of death, who have lost their foundation and ground, who know what this mystery is all about.

Over and over I've heard Richard Rohr say that we get moved from one level of consciousness to another one of two ways: through a great defeat or loss or through a spiritual practice.

This is the second of the two functions religion can serve and has served; usually for just a small minority. Here the function of religion is not to bolster the ego but to lead to radical transformation and liberation by utterly shattering the ego. A crucifixion, if you will.

If you avoid having a daily spiritual practice, this is one of the reasons. Rohr says, "contemplative prayer or meditation is planned and organized failure."

In our practice we stand a chance of seeing how much part of the system we are. Then we look at the cross and say not "look what he did for me" - which demands absolutely nothing from us - but, rather, "look what we did to him." And, perhaps, we can risk asking if we are still doing it? If doing so contributes to our transformation, we can truly said, "Thank God, it's Friday."

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.