

“Acting in Ignorance” / Acts 3:12-19 / 29 April 2012

Well look at old Peter. He’s grown up to be quite the hellfire and brimstone preacher, hasn’t he? “You acted in ignorance,” Peter declares to the crowds. “You and your leaders acted in ignorance when you condemned Jesus to death...but you’re still guilty of killing an innocent man.” In other words, you folks got all caught up in a big messy system, a mob mentality, of judgment and destruction. And though the system was bigger than you, and you didn’t know how to resist it, you still have a hand in the crimes it committed. You didn’t personally kill anyone, but you all bear the blame.

Acting in ignorance doesn’t always make the consequences any less severe. Back in the year 2000, the Presbyterian Church (USA) flew all of its hardworking Africa missionaries down to Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, for a conference at a beautiful resort. In those days, Robert Mugabe was only just beginning to act like the unbalanced dictator he is today, and Zimbabwe was still quite a tourist destination. It was Africa, yes, but nothing like the Africas where most of us lived. This place had paved roads, and ATMs, and steak houses. It had swimming pools and air conditioning. It was a tourists’ haven with nightclubs, and casinos, and brothels. The one and only time in my life that I ever spent money in a casino, it was there in Victoria Falls. And let me tell you, it might look like Monopoly money, and it might be worth about as much as Monopoly money, but Zimbabwean money is no more fun to lose than American dollars. The waterfalls were magnificent. They roared and sent their spraying mist half a mile into the sky. The falls were immense and hypnotic; they made Niagara Falls look like a dripping faucet. Every morning we had breakfast in a huge, open-air garden where the monkeys would scamper in from the bushes and sit down right at your table, screeching and staring until you gave them a piece of bread. Of course, nowadays, most people wouldn’t travel in Zimbabwe. All its grand tourist casinos and resorts stand empty, silent evidence of Mugabe’s descent into madness. But this was in the last, waning days of their glory. Victoria Falls was spectacular. And the wildlife in that part of Africa was amazing. You could be driving down the road, and a herd of giraffes might step out in front of your car. A troupe of baboons might throw fruit at you from the roadside trees.

Most of us missionaries were living and working in places of human need and misery, places where the only monkey at the breakfast table was in the pot. And so, we were fascinated by the vast display of wildlife in Southern Africa. One day during the course of that relaxing getaway, about thirty of us decided to rent a few land rovers, and go on an animal-viewing safari in the nearby country of Botswana.

We whizzed past herds of zebras and huge packs of graceful gazelles. We saw rhinoceroses standing off in the distance. And giraffes kept stepping out onto the road in front of our vehicle. There were lions, great packs of them, and the driver would stop the land rover just several yards away from where they rested in the shade. And we saw hyenas, hideous creatures, feeding on a dead water buffalo. There were thousands of flamingoes and wild dogs and monkeys of every description. A troupe of baboons threw rocks at our car. We saw everything, everything—that is—except elephants. Where were all the elephants? Finally, we came to the Okavango Delta of the Chobé River, and all thirty of us filed onto a pontoon boat: fifteen missionaries sitting on one side and fifteen missionaries sitting on the other side. The boat was packed. Once on the river, we saw crocodiles swimming right alongside of us. There were hippos, Africa’s deadliest animal, opening their big pink mouths out of the water just beside the boat.

People took pictures. They pointed and marveled at how close we were to such dangerous beasts. But still no elephants presented themselves for our viewing pleasure. We floated on for perhaps thirty minutes, until at last, someone sitting next to me, near the front of the boat, hollered “Elephant!” And there on the riverbank, lay a dead elephant with a lion chewing its ear. And further back, perhaps a quarter mile away, a whole pack of elephants watched us with suspicion. Then it was mayhem on the missionary pontoon boat. In a thrilled rush, thirty missionaries, with cameras in tow, charged to my end of the pontoon boat to get a better view of the elephants. The African navigator gave out an angry curse, as my end of the boat immediately sank into the waters of the Chobé River. Water overtook half the deck. One fellow went overboard. It was a sinking ship. Realizing what was happening, people scrambled back toward their places in search of dry ground. Pontoons tip easily, but they’re buoyant. The sunken tip began to rise again, and we were spared certain doom among the crocodiles and hippos of the Chobé. I was soaked up to my waste. My passport was saturated. Cameras and other items were washed away. Everyone was shaken. If we hadn’t redistributed our weight in time, some of us would have been crocodile bait. Others would have been rent apart by the hippos. And those of us who made it to shore would have faced lions, and hyenas, and wild dogs in miles of trackless grassland. It would have made the evening news back here in the States: thirty Presbyterian missionaries, death by absurdity. Oh ignorance! Who knew that a pontoon boat would sink if the weight onboard was not equally distributed? Who knew that thirty missionaries, intelligent people, medical doctors and school administrators, who knew that we could all be so...confoundedly ignorant?

They say that what you don’t know can’t hurt you. Ignorance is bliss...until the waitress brings the bill. But we all know that what you don’t know can hurt you. It can downright kill you. Civilizations collapse when people ignorantly engage in collective wrongs that undermine the very society that created them. It’s like the missionaries rushing to the same end of the boat to get pictures of the elephants. Now, I had a strict policy in Africa not to carry a camera; I believed that cameras made local people feel objectified. (Unfortunately, now I have almost no pictures from my Africa days.) The point is that I did not rush to photograph the elephants. But I would have made a nice snack for a crocodile, all the same. Collective acts of ignorance can sink an entire ship, innocent and guilty alike.

This is what the Apostle Peter is talking about today in our reading from the Book of Acts. “You people killed the Author of Life! God raised him from the dead...but you still killed him!” You still bear that collective guilt. Then Peter goes on to say, “Now, I know that you acted in ignorance. You had that whole mob mentality thing going on. It wasn’t any one individual, but all of you in a group. Still, you’re each partly responsible.” And I ask, still today, in modern America where our privileged lives rely on complex systems of banking, and trading, and advertising, and purchasing, in what ways do you and I participate in big, collective injustices—perhaps even killing the Author of Life?

In the black and white world where most of us grew up, there was no such thing as “collective guilt.” Faults always had to be personal and private, because how else could they be punished? Here’s a confession: My first major transgression as a child was to steal a handful of Swedish fish candy from behind the glass counter at the furniture store when Mr. Schreckengost was in the back with a customer. My brother saw me do it. But the crime is mine, not his. And, according to my understanding of God and life at

the time, it meant that God was watching, writing it all down in a book. And when I died, that book would be opened, and there in its pages, the crime would be found. “Hmm, looks like there was an incident with some Swedish fish in Dayton, Pennsylvania, in July, 1975. We’ve got a witness who saw the whole thing, your younger brother. Restitution was never made; the crime was never confessed. And so, your windowless cell in the afterlife will get an additional degree (Fahrenheit) per fish.” There was no sense that society or my parents bore some of the blame for making me into a petty criminal. My crime, my punishment.

Parenthetically, I hope the church is moving away from the belief that faith is all about punishments and rewards. And yet, I think even people out in the larger world still tend to believe that guilt belongs to individuals—not groups. It doesn’t matter that the Old Testament prophets are forever chastising whole nations for their unfair treatment of the poor, their corrupt legal systems, their neglect of widows, orphans, and the homeless. And this is why you will never hear a TV preacher speaking on a text from Amos, or Joel, or Micah. Those so-called “minor prophets” dwelled on the collective crimes of whole societies.

But popular religion in America today lacks the scope and the depth to deal with systemic injustices. Why? Because if popular religion were to tackle systemic injustice, then its clergy would have to educate themselves about politics and economics. (And if we were capable of mastering useful knowledge, then why would we be clergy?) The faithful would be called upon to make a difference in society. We would be asked to speak out against our own nation from time to time. Worse, we would have to re-examine some of the big economic and legal systems from which most of us benefit. Who wants a religion that makes us give up our share in the status quo? No, it’s far easier if religion is all about the afterlife; if your energies and attentions are directed toward escaping the fires of hell, then you’ll allow this world to stay pretty much as it is. If we can keep religion chasing its own tail with questions of personal sin and salvation, then we won’t have to look at the ways we—in our goodhearted ignorance—kill the Author of life by laying waste to the planet, or by banking with socially irresponsible institutions. If faith is all about heaven and hell, then you and I will never have to think about how our society’s love of cheap consumer goods and waxy-shiny fruit actually produces the desperate living conditions across the border that lead to illegal immigration. If Christianity is about personal salvation only, then we can remain self-centered, self-serving people...all with God’s benediction.

Speaking of acting in ignorance, I’ve been reading typos and bloopers that have made their way inadvertently into real life church bulletins. (Not every church has Bill Cadwell to proofread its publications!) Some of the bulletin bloopers are only mildly humorous, like the announcement that declares, “Low Self-Esteem Support Group meets on Thursday at 7pm. Please use the back door.” Some create a visual image, like the one that says, “This being Easter Sunday, Mrs. Lewis will come forward to lay an egg on the altar.” One bulletin announcement declares, “At the evening service tonight, the sermon topic will be ‘What Is Hell?’ Come early and listen to our choir practice.” Things done in ignorance! Some are humorous. Some are harmless. Some are downright deadly.

We’re all vaguely aware of ways that we—by our very way of life—participate in the unhappiness of the larger world. We know that, as a collectivity, no middle class professional in America today has unsullied hands. We’re all aware of the steps we can

take to live simpler, more just lives, closer to the earth that sustains us, more in harmony with the world's other people, and other living things.

But one of the unofficial promises of Bower Hill Church is, "We preach love, not guilt." So let's turn the coin of collective guilt to see its flip side: how about the power of our collective goodness? Return to the pontoon boat full of missionaries, bobbing past hippos and crocs in the waters of the Okavango Delta. When most missionaries acted in ignorance, all of us nearly perished together. But when we figured out the problem, the thirty of us worked together to fix it. Just as there is collective guilt in the world today, there is also collective redemption! I daresay, all real reconciliation, all true rebirth, all genuine and lasting redemption is a group effort! Just as an ignorant crowd can be lonely and destructive, a mindful crowd can be a place of true healing and embrace; it's called "a community." It's the thing for which we've been created: community. Which of us, in our loneliness and pain, has never found solace in the community of faith? That sense of belonging keeps us coming back for more—perhaps despite our uncertainties about God and faith. We may not have many answers to metaphysical questions, but we've known the support and love of the people of God. And that's usually enough.

When our first daughter was born at one pound, one ounce, and spent four months in the hospital, Eastminster Presbyterian Church brought us meals, every other weekday, for almost sixteen weeks. We were seminary interns at Eastminster, and I had big theological differences with that church. But in times of crisis, those differences mattered not a wit. They stepped up, as a group, and collectively gave us more than meals; they gave us strength. When God is hardest to love, God's people become most loving. When God is hardest to understand, in times of sorrow and loss, God's people shine their brightest, reminding you why you bother with this messy, old-fashioned thing called church. When groups act in ignorance, it does harm. But when groups act in love, and in mindfulness, and in faith, it spreads healing. Just as it's possible to participate in unwieldy systems of injustice, we can also take part in big systems of justice, and goodness, and healing. We have it in our collective power to heal our world.

And so, here we are this morning, chugging down the dangerous river of life, all of us in the same boat. Stay plugged into the community, because what we do as a group matters. You may not personally provide clean water to a Haitian village; you may not personally feed a North Side family; you may not personally give the hope of a college education to a poor kid in Garfield, but here in Christ's imperfect church, you participate in a big system that strives for justice. It's a system that seeks the true, and the good, and the beautiful. And this system will be here for you when you need it. Amen.