

“Treason Doesn’t Trump Love”

1 John 4:8-21

“This We Believe” Sermon Series

Sunday, April 13, 2008 The Third Truth: Jesus Christ Reveals God’s Love

Treason. Now that there is one strong, attention-getting word! It is not a word I’ve ever used in a sermon. Oh, but for such an awful word, it’s such a perfect polar-opposite companion to the good news of God’s victorious love we find in our Scripture lesson this morning.

Let’s hear a straight-up definition since this is such a “heavy” word. On one level, according to the comprehensive resource that is www.dictionary.com, treason “is a breach of faith, a betrayal of trust or confidence.” Okay – *breach, betrayal, treason* – got it. Further, it is “treachery, a violation of allegiance to one’s sovereign or to one’s state.” *Breach, betrayal, treachery, violation.* Most disturbing, it is defined as “the offense of acting to overthrow one’s government or to harm or kill its sovereign.” *Breach, betrayal, treachery, violation, offensive overthrow of a sovereign.*

Strictly speaking “treason” is a legal term. More broadly, though, it is a word and a reality that harbors tremendous moral offense to individuals and to entire peoples. A person who commits treason is a “traitor,” which, again, is a legal term that packs a gut-wrenching, mind-pounding personal punch.

Perhaps this is why “treason” is the only crime specifically defined in the United States Constitution. Did you know that? Well, with very good reason! Our founders were appalled by the abuses of English Law. For example, King Henry VIII had a habit of crying “treason!” and “traitor!” in the face of anyone who criticized his multiple marriages. This served to justify a further cry of “off with his head!”

Protecting against such capricious, self-serving behavior, Article III, section 3 of our Constitution stipulates that an indictment of treason can only be applied to a person or people who wage war against the United States. I’ve come to learn, according to one article I’ve read, that in our country’s history, there have only been 40 federal prosecutions and even fewer convictions on the grounds of treason. Of those convicted in more recent history, you may know the name of Robert Henry Best, an American broadcaster who broadcast Nazi propaganda. This son of Methodist minister was indicted on twelve counts and received life in prison. This behavior takes the “P.K.” (Pastor’s Kid) label to a whole new, very uncomfortable level!

You may be wondering why this legal and political jargon is being offered for your

consideration in a sermon. That's because it is not only a legal and political term having to do with national security. It's also a word offered up in the context of biblical truth that has to do with our identity and security as God's people. It's just one word that popped up in exactly one sentence of the third chapter of Pastor Stephen Plunkett's book [This We Believe](#), but it stuck to me like a flytrap captures a fly.

Treason, you see, is what Adam and Eve were guilty of when they made the treacherous decision to disobey God. God set only one boundary for them – not to become like God by ingesting full knowledge of good and evil. I believe God set this boundary knowing full well that if the creatures created in His image were to breach it, it would bear the fruit of rebellion in them forevermore. But still, out of love, God created them with a freedom of mind and heart and soul to make choices, hopefully choices that exhibit unconditional holy love. Our first parents, though, took the bait of temptation, blasted through the boundary between being in God's image and actually possessing God's full wisdom, and thus soiled their life in the sacred garden for good. *Breach, betrayal, treachery, violation, offensive overthrow of... God.*

We are inescapably Adam and Eve's spiritual offspring. Their part in God's story as it is found in our Scriptures is our story too. We too are guilty of treason. Sin is treason, a treacherous breach in trusting the holy design of the Architect of All. What happened in the story of the Garden of Eden, you may also hear called "original sin." This can therefore be defined as waging war against the divine government of our God. Plunkett explains this poignantly by writing that our first parents are "a reflection of our own self-interest and self-absorption, our own transgression of God-given boundaries, our own propensity for exchanging the truth about God for a lie (Rom. 1:25). Peering in the mirror of Adam and Eve," he concludes, "we glimpse the treason of our own ravenous hunger for autonomy and the wasteful squandering of the good gifts of God ... what Adam and Eve did, we all do."

How does it feel being told we are all guilty of treason? I hope it feels absolutely horrible and completely offensive. Not because I enjoy causing anyone to feel this way, but because this is a true part of humankind we mustn't gloss over if we want to grow in authenticity and accountability as Christians.

Personally, it makes me feel angry and ashamed. I know well that deep in the nebulous corners of my soul, there is an undeniable part of me that wants to not only *play* God, but to actually *be* God, possessing absolute power over all right and wrong, life and death. Then I'd maybe be able change this "free will" part of us enough to prevent wars, natural disasters, cancers and accidents. And I could strike justice

against abusers and criminals of every rank and file. I just can't help but pridefully want to have that power. I just can't help but be confronted by the continuous temptation to breach my faith and trust in the one true Sovereign and Architect of All, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It's an ugly part of me, but one I've been in conversation with a long, long time.

Several years ago, I felt a fuller measure of this temptation, this heritage of spiritual treachery, when I held a handgun for the first and only time in my life. It happened to be some sort of really powerful weapon, since it belonged to a senior FBI agent and SWAT trained friend of mine. It was right around the time of 9-11 too ... so I felt raw, more than a bit powerless over my enemies, and hungry for justice. There is no other way to put it, holding that handgun gave me a strong sense that I could have the "delicious possibility of equality with God." I held the gun as an exercise in faith, to test how willing I was to intrinsically trust God to be God as my protector and deliverer from evil. I also did so as preparation for a church class study on the topic of handgun violence I was teaching with this friend. In short, I believe the words I offered in that class were all the more genuine because of this simple but very powerful excavation of my spirit.

Now the big question that must arise from the very real treason and treachery of the heart that is original sin – how has and does God respond to it? The offense is eternally great. Is the count of treasonous guilt our life sentence? Punishable by death and by being put in a spiritual lock-up, forever separated from the loving goodness of God our Creator? Does the spiritual rebellion we wage with God end in our destruction and separation from the goodness, harmony and wholeness originally intended for us before Adam and Eve tragically exercised their free will? Does our high treason trump God's love?

Hear the Good News! *"In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loves us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins ... love has been perfected among us ... as [the Son] is, so are we in this world."* (1 John 4:10, 17). For we who truly want harmony instead of treachery in our relationship with God and one another, there are no sweeter, more beautiful, more reassuring words than these. In Jesus Christ, our trust-breaching, self-absorbed sin is not only forgiven, it is completely blotted from our record on the day we meet our Maker. We are again made at-one (we are *at-oned*) with God. The record of our sinsick souls is completely expunged, thrown out of court as inadmissible evidence that humankind can ever be more powerful, can ever overthrow the love of God Almighty.

To further state and sum this up, in the wonderful words of Pastor Plunkett, through the Gospel “We learn the jagged realities of our alienation from God and each other peculiarly through the lens of redemption by which we are mercifully delivered from the jaws of death, freed from the yawning chasm of self-destruction, and set firmly on the church’s one foundation, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

While a good and faithful reading of the Bible makes this clear, it does seem to me that Pastor Plunkett and I have received some similar comments from all sorts of parishioners through our years of ministry. These comments try to softly spin the hard-reality of our sinful selves. And in doing so, they cheapen the grace extended to us by the holy hands that were pierced for our transgressions. The comments sound in the same vain as this woman, a mother of two young daughters, quoted by Plunkett – “I just hate the part of the worship service where we have the confession of sin. It’s not healthy for our children to get such a negative view of themselves, and at church, of all places.” To this woman someone quickly replied, “The Christian faith is supposed to be positive, and I resent having my nose rubbed in the dirt of sin week after week. After all, I’m not even guilty of most of the sins printed in the prayer of confession, so why should I pray it? It doesn’t even apply to me.”

How can any of us profess to believe in what was accomplished through the Cross of Christ and then deny original sin? It doesn’t add up. Is it comfortable to confess? No. And, yes, we prefer not to feel disturbed in the least. But I believe soul-stirring admissions of treasonous thoughts and actions against God are the only way to fully find ourselves in the gracious fold of God’s love through Jesus Christ our Lord. Can you really describe how wonderful a warm, sunny, springtime day is if you’ve never experienced a cold, dark and treacherous night? Can you really say that God truly, deeply, unconditionally loves you if you believe God only pays attention to the better parts of your nature?

“In this is love, *not* that we loved God but that *God loves us* and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins ... love has been perfected among us ... as [the Son] is, so are we in this world.” (1 John 4:10, 17). Amen.