

“Upside Down”

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I have talked before about Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, who wrote this very interesting book, entitled “Jesus’ Final Days.”

In this book they talk about Jesus’ triumphal entry, and they describe Jesus coming down from the Mount of Olives on the east side of the old city; coming down and in, palms waving and peasants gathered around. They [Borg and Crossan] said that about the same time that Jesus is entering from the east side, here comes Pontius Pilate entering from the west side - the opposite side of the city - and here he is riding on a powerful warrior’s horse - chariots around, and military in all of their glorious armor - and they come riding in with all of the noise and power, and pomp and circumstance. What a difference between the east and the west, between the peasants and the military, between the meek and the lowly, and the powerful and influential.

Both were there for the same reason: the Passover. But they were both there for very different reasons. For Jesus it was to be there and to be the sacrifice; for Pilate it was to keep the order. And, he [Pilate] was keeping the order, and he was in a great deal of trouble, because he had not always been able to keep the order. In Rome they were beginning to question whether Pilate had what it took to be the leader, because if he couldn’t control this mob of peasants in this backwater place we call Israel, in the city of Jerusalem, if he couldn’t control that small little band - then they would find someone who could.

So Pilate, who seems so powerful, was frightened, and his actions betrayed his fears,

So, I want to stop for a moment and look at this, another way. I have a great deal of respect for cognitive theory and I want to look, at a very basic level, at what motivated Jesus and what motivated Pilate - two people caught up in a firestorm of change, conflict and power in Jerusalem during the Passover - who would be drawn together and have two very different things occur because of it.

So let’s look at it from a Cognitive Therapy point of view; A Cognitive Therapist addresses distortion in a person’s perspective of themselves and those around them. When we see the world around us we are not seeing reality. We are seeing it distorted by our mixed-up lens, and we respond with distortions that are not real - and we mess things up, according to Cognitive Therapy. So I want to look at a few of those distortions and how Jesus sees the event and how Pilate sees the event.

The first Cognitive Distortion is All-or-Nothing Thinking. And, here is Pilate, as I said, dealing with these Roman authorities who expect him to help to handle it or he will get replaced. With Caesar - and if you got replaced in that day and age, by Caesar - replaced could mean being murdered. He had a lot to worry about.

So, with this all or nothing thinking, you can just imagine Pilate sitting in his throne wondering, “How am I going to keep the peace? Because if I don’t, I’m going to get murdered.” It went from “might” to “will.” It meant either control them or murder them.

Everything Pilate started to do was distorted by this all or nothing thinking. and it would manipulate him into every decision that he made.

Meanwhile Jesus was entering, knowing that he was going to die. It wasn't an all or nothing thought, but he entered realizing that he needed to do this, because whatever happened to him would be the will of God - and he would make a positive change in this world. The decision fit his personal mission of doing the will of God.

Cognitive Decision or Distortion Number 2: Over-generalization. Pilate was sure that the Jews had created yet another uprising, and were waiting to act out on it at the Passover - because, how dare this itinerant, Galilean preacher come storming into Jerusalem, riding on a horse? Only Kings did that. And, the *gall* of the people to throw down their palm branches and their cloaks! That's what you did for Caesar. "How *dare* this ignorant, little preacher from that backwater we call Nazareth, have the unmitigated gall to claim to be a king, to act like one; and for the people to have the arrogance to call him "King" in front of me? Don't they know if they do that I [Pilate] will have to respond, because that is the one thing Rome will not accept?" So, he over-generalized.

Meanwhile Jesus is remembered as the one who sat with the Samaritan woman at the well. He didn't over-generalize the Samaritan woman by saying, "I won't talk to any women." He didn't over-generalize women. He treated each one with respect and dignity in a time when no one dared do that.

Jesus didn't over-generalize Samaritans either. In an age when Jews treated Samaritans like dogs, he respected this Samaritan woman at the well. He didn't over-generalize and say, "Samaritans have no right to live. They are following their faith inappropriately and deserve to die," which many Jews did. He treated each person with respect and dignity, and did not over-generalize who they were, what they thought, or who they should be.

Cognitive Distortion Number Three: How we check our mental filter. Our mental filter, I think, is an important concept to understand. The thing about your mental filter is how you speak to yourself. Many of us have a lot of trouble talking to ourselves. You would never go up to someone, call them an idiot, and say, "How horrible are you? You don't deserve to live. You can't do anything right." And, yet, we talk to ourselves that way all of the time. Every minute of every day. We can't control it. We are talking to ourselves. We are thinking, and - if we don't have control - we let our minds run amuck.

When we are raising our children, we are trying to show them how to sit appropriately, how to act appropriately, how to speak appropriately around adults and around other children; how to relate that there is a different way in which you behave in Church - which is different than when you are alone in your room. We don't often require ourselves to learn to control our own minds to behave properly, to say, "Scott, it's not appropriate in your mind to degrade yourself. Scott, it is not appropriate for you to be acting out and cursing yourself and telling yourself how bad you are. Would you talk to someone else the way you are talking to yourself, Scott?" That is your mental filter, and most of us destroy ourselves by the self-talk and mental filter that we do not control.

Pilate did not have control of his own mental filter. He would play scenarios in his mind over and over, and in each one he was not quite good enough. He was cruel to himself. He

kept telling himself that he wasn't good enough or appropriate enough, and then he would lash out at others who had absolutely no idea what in the world he was talking about. Then he would be surprised, because they didn't act the way he thought they should respond; when the whole time they had no idea what he was saying to himself - the way he was being degraded in his own head.

Meanwhile, there is Jesus, who had control over his own mental filter; who could speak to himself with respect and dignity - not because he thought he was better than everyone else - but because he knew he was made in the image of God. And, what God made needed to be treated with respect. Jesus knew that by teaching yourself to respect yourself - to speak to yourself with dignity - to treat yourself carefully. Because, you know, when you are talking to your children, that by hollering at them, degrading them, it hurts them terribly to be treated that way. So, you are careful - or you should be - very careful about how you treat your children and talk to them to build them up. How many times have we failed to do that to ourselves? We are so destructive in the way we hurt ourselves - but Jesus had control over his mind and had dignity and respect for himself.

I have been bothered sometimes by this whole idea of Holy Week, because isn't Jesus coming into the triumphal entry time knowing he is going to die? Isn't that just sick or mentally disturbing? I mean, going in willingly to hang on that cross - how different is that from some person who wants to die and points a gun at a police officer, hoping that the police would shoot him - because that is police-assisted suicide? We have a term for it now and it is wrong. Didn't Jesus do just about the same thing willingly, going into the city? My argument is, "No." The difference is - what is Jesus doing it for? Because he hates himself and wants to destroy himself? Or, is he doing it because it is the only way to bring people from death to new life, from giving up to finding hope and resurrection in their lives.

The fourth Cognitive Distortion that human beings have is Emotional Reasoning. Over and over again, you see it - and you will notice it on Good Friday - the banter between Jesus and Pilate. Pilate comes to the point where he is begging Jesus. He is doing it because he has all of these emotions in himself. At one point in that banter between Jesus and Pilate, Pilate is just screaming at Jesus, "Just tell them who you are and what you are doing, and don't make me condemn you." The whole time Jesus is the one in control - not Pilate. It seems like Pilate has all of the control. He is the one who can decide what happens - whether Jesus lives or dies - and the whole time Pilate is the one acting like he is the one without control.

We can let our emotions run us - the only problem is emotions are not fair. Whoever cries with an emotional person is the one who gets their way. Whoever can plead the worst "sorry song" gets the attention of the emotional person, and that is not fair. Fair is being able to have emotions, but control emotions, and then in midst of the emotion, put it aside long enough to evaluate. Again, we go back to parenting.

The reason Jill and I had one child is because it's easy. [Laughter] You have four - oh, Good Lord! [Laughter] Because when you have more than one child, you don't know who did it [who to blame]. [Laughter] You have one child [inferring you know who to blame]. (Well, every once in a while I worried that Jill did it.) But you have four kids and you don't know who did it all of the time. And, if you are a parent who needs a little more work, you are basing who's right or wrong based on which child cried the worst, or pointed the finger the best, or looked the most innocent (usually the one that looks the most innocent is the

guilty one). If you act based on which child brings the most emotion out in you, you probably need another parenting lesson. The best parents are the ones who sit down, try to put their own emotion out of it and evaluate the situation. And, if the child makes you madder than heck, that is acceptable, because they all do that once in a while. You have to be honest with yourself and with your emotions. Then have the power to put your emotions aside, and sit down with your child, and find out what happened. Then make a decision and a punishment that fits the crime, not too little and not too much. That has to be done by removing the emotion from the moment.

Pilate had trouble doing that with Jesus; Jesus infuriated him because, “do what you must,” [Jesus said]. Jesus was free of the bondage of his own emotion to respond to Pilate in the way that was necessary to fulfill the Kingdom of God. That is what we all must strive to do - overcome the emotion to get beyond the distortion to see the moment clearly.

The final distortion that I want to share with you is distortion of Personalization. That is defined as when you see yourself as the cause of some negative external event in which you are not primarily responsible. You have some people who say, “I’m sorry,” for everything. You might be that person. Whether you were even there or not, you are the first person to say, “I’m sorry.” You take the blame when it isn’t your fault. You hear your inner voice telling you it must have been you because you are that bad; no one else is as bad as you, so when there is a problem it must be you. And, it’s not. You just personalize everything - you shouldn’t have even been there. Pilate felt that way: “It’s not fair that I’m constantly put in this position. It must be me. How come I’m the one? Why is it that those Jewish people never talk nice with me?” Jesus went to the cross knowing that it wasn’t him. They were murdering themselves on that cross - he was just hanging there for them; he didn’t personalize it.

You may say, “Scott, you are putting words in Jesus’ mouth. How do you know? You weren’t there.” Because he said, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.” If he had personalized it in any way, he wouldn’t have been able to say that in that moment. “It is done, I give myself over to you, Lord.” If he had personalized it, he couldn’t have said it, and he would have been scared to die. We cannot be responsible for the things we have not done. We can learn from Jesus. And, we can learn from what Pilate didn’t do right in our own lives. Learn from those distortions in how you live your life.

I took those five distortions from the Cognitive Theory book, but I want to tell you which book I took it from. It was a book from 1981 and the author was Dr. David Burns. He wrote a wonderful follow up that was less technical but more available to the common reader - like you and me. You didn’t have to have a PhD. It is called (and, again, why did he let his publicist come up with the title?), the original one [title] I complained about a while ago when I used it as an illustration: “The Feeling Good Handbook.” That just sounds so cheesy. He follows it with “Feeling Good.” That is so tacky. Please get beyond the title. It is so much more meaningful and deeper than that, and it is called “Feeling Good the New Mood Therapy.” It’s not new. Cognitive Therapy has been around forever, but he [Burns] writes it in a new way. He helps us see the distortions in our lives, to separate emotions from reality and to help us deal with whether it’s depression or struggling. Whatever it is in your life that is keeping you from being healthy and whole; this helps you see it and overcome it.

Jesus is probably one of the finest examples of how to do that. I pray that where there is struggle and trial in your life that you will begin to evaluate it, to put the emotion aside long enough to see yourself in Jesus' last week. When we see the Apostles receiving the bread and cup on Maundy Thursday, you will see yourself in them; and on Good Friday on that cross, so that you can see yourself being resurrected because you are worthy of it. You have to put aside your bad self-talk, your personalization, and all of the other distortions, so that you feel valued and available enough to participate in Easter as a resurrected son and daughter of Jesus Christ.

That is our goal this week, and may we come to God in prayer trusting in that Divine blessing, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.