

*The Great Overturning*  
A Sermon on 1 Peter 3 and Romans 6 by the Rev. Philip Major  
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There is some extra heaviness in our hearts this week, as we observed several tragic events in the world. The state of Israel continued its offensive against Hamas in the Gaza Strip. In the process more than 500, perhaps as many as 1000 civilians were killed, just in the past seven days. Russian military forces continued their systematic destruction of Ukraine, this week capturing the city of Avdiivka, a once beautiful city of 35,000 people that has been turned to rubble. Make no mistake, Vladimir Putin sees Ukraine as a mortal threat that must be destroyed because year by year, Ukraine has become a stronger democracy, more closely aligned with the values of the free, democratic nations of Europe. In a prison in Siberia, Alexi Navalny, one of the few Russians with the resources and skill to tell the truth about the corruption of Putin's dictatorial regime, died as a result of his incarceration.

In Kansas City, there was a highly publicized mass shooting, one of 50 mass shootings in the United States in the first eight weeks of this year. The woman who died was just one of 5000 people who have died from gun violence in 2024. In a courtroom in New York City the trial of former President Donald Trump concluded with a guilty verdict. Mr. Trump was found guilty of fraud, and ordered to pay back over \$350 million, money that was earned illegally by Mr. Trump. This is the first time a former president of the United States has been convicted of such a crime. In his ruling, the judge criticized the former president for refusing to admit that he had violated the law, saying that his "complete lack of contrition and remorse borders on the pathological." Lack of contrition is a characteristic Mr. Trump shares with President Putin of Russia, President Netanyahu of Israel, and, it appears, Justices of the Supreme Court of the United States.

I say that the Justices of the Supreme Court appear to lack any sense of contrition, because of the startling rise in gun deaths in America in the past fifteen years. There have been very many gun deaths in the United States for a long time. The number of deaths actually fell for seven years in the 1990s after an assault weapons ban was put in place. But since 2008 the number of high powered and automatic weapons, such as were used in the Kansas City shootings, have increased dramatically, and the number of deaths has increased by many thousands. In 2008 the Supreme Court began overturning local and state laws regulating firearms. Since 2008 the average number of gun deaths in the United States has increased from about 30,000 per year to about 45,000 per year.

If you were one of the members of the Supreme Court who had overturned the gun laws put in place by our elected officials, you would probably feel some responsibility for the increasing numbers of deaths. Yet I have never heard a single word of concern from the Justices who contributed to the flood of weapons of war into the streets and cities of America. In this way, it appears that some of the Justices of the Supreme Court are very much like Vladimir Putin and former President Trump and President Netanyahu; in each case, it appears these individuals have no feelings of contrition, no feelings of guilt for the harms they have caused.

September, 1940 was a similarly troubling time, at least it was troubling for Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer, the great German theologian, observed much of what we are observing today. A large nation had invaded its smaller, weaker neighbor. Presidents and heads of state refused to take any responsibility for the terrible injuries they had caused.

Bonhoeffer observed that one essential characteristic was completely absent in these leaders: feelings of shame and guilt. Bonhoeffer observes that our ability to recognize our mistakes plays a critical role in our spiritual lives. Writing in 1940, Bonhoeffer says, *Shame is man's ineffaceable recollection of his estrangement from God; Shame is grief for this estrangement, and the powerless longing to return to unity with God.* According to Bonhoeffer, when we have feelings of guilt or shame, we are taking the first step in the right direction; we are recognizing that, by our actions, we have moved away from God.

For Bonhoeffer, and for us, the story does not end with our feelings of shame or guilt. Shame and guilt are only the starting point. Through our feelings of shame or guilt we realize we have moved away

from God, even in some small way. In the New Testament we discover our path to reconciliation with God. We are reconciled to God through the words, the life, the death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus.

Jesus' suffering and death on the cross was a critical part of this work of reconciliation. So the cross, which was a symbol of torture and terror in Roman times, is now a symbol of our reconciliation with God, through Christ Jesus.

This transformation of the meaning of the cross, from a symbol of terror to a symbol of our reconciliation with God, did not happen overnight. According to the New Testament, Christ rose from the dead after just two nights, but his disciples did not immediately recognize that a seismic shift had taken place in the meaning of the cross. The meaning of Christ's death on the cross was something people argued about for many years. What does it mean for us, that Christ died on the cross?

You may have noticed that I inserted an extra reading into our worship service, the passage from Paul's letter to the Romans. This is one of the things I like about the lectionary; the lectionary tells us which scripture passages we must use but it doesn't say we can't add an extra passage or two. We can see the different authors of the books of the New Testament trying to explain the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion, death, and resurrection. The author of 1 Peter wrote these words three generations after the first Easter: *Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God.* Christ suffered death on the cross in order to bring us to God, in order to bring reconciliation between God and humankind.

For the author of 1 Peter, the main idea is not that we, as humans, have sinned. The main idea is that Christ has restored us to the place where we began, which is directly connected with the one who created us in their own image. For the author of 1 Peter, the focus is not on our mistakes, the focus is on God's grace.

Yet people have a way of turning the message of the New Testament upside down. One of the ways people turn God's message upside down is to make the guilt of men and women the main idea of the story. You've probably seen a message printed on billboards and bumper stickers drawn from a fragment of a verse from 1 Corinthians 15: "Christ died for our sins"

When I see this message on a roadside billboard I end up thinking about my mistakes, partly because I make a lot of them. As Bonhoeffer reminds us, acknowledging our mistakes is important, because it is the first step in the process of returning to God. But it is only the first step. The story does not end there.

St. Paul gives us much more of the story in his letter to the Romans: *Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.* The point of the story is not that we are guilty, but that we too might walk in newness of life. Paul continues, *We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of our sins might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.* The point is for us to leave behind our ways of harming others, ways of thinking and acting that are so sticky that we get stuck in our mistakes. Paul describes the great overturning that was accomplished through Christ's death and resurrection. *We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.*

Christ has turned the symbol of the cross from a symbol of torture and oppression, to a symbol of our reconciliation with God. In order to receive the gift of God's grace, we have to accept that we are in need, that we have made many mistakes and cannot save ourselves. But the cross is not the symbol of our guilt. The cross is the symbol of God's saving work in our lives. Through the cross, Christ reconciled us to God so that we might live, not in our mistakes, or in our guilt, but participating in God's love. *The death Christ died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.* So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. God has overturned the meaning of the cross. God's great desire is for there to be a similar transformation in your life, from brokenness to wholeness, from guilt to love.