

Easter Sunday
April 19, 2019
The Rev. Scott Walters

Bob Mitchell was Ardelle's grandfather and the grandson of Mary Jemima Arkansas Woodrum Mitchell. She's not actually relevant to this sermon. I just like saying her name. Bob Mitchell owned the Owl Cafe in Bastrop, Louisiana and drank 24 cups of coffee a day. When asked, "Doesn't all that coffee keep you awake?" He said, "It helps."

Recently I heard an interview with Teju Cole, a photographer and writer from Lagos. I could listen to him talk for hours about anything. But the line that's still ringing in my head is one that could have been said by anyone. He said, "One thing I do know for sure is that we all need a great deal of help."

It seems like such a humble question for a day as glorious as Easter. What with all those organ stops pulled and flowers exploding from all over this grand old room. But what I find myself wondering today about the resurrection of Jesus is simply this: Does it help?

I mean...does it help a life like yours or like mine? And not "Does it help us get into heaven after we die?" so much as "Does it help the someone you're worrying or mourning or rooting for in this life? Does it help any of us in ways that might matter to us right now?"

Well, if we're going to tackle the small question of help on this biggest of Christian days, I thought we could spice up the project by defending a really offensive old Christian idea along the way.

It's Augustine's idea that babies are sinful. Do you know about this? You might not. For some reason not many Episcopal priests seem to bring it up in Easter sermons.

Anyway, it goes like this. In his *Confessions*, you can read about all kinds of things St. Augustine feels really bad about having done over the course of his life. One of the more surprising ones is that he's certain he was a very selfish baby. He knows this because all babies are selfish. They come into the world demanding things, don't they? Things like...oh, don't know...food. Warmth. An un-chapped behind. Stuff like that.

And when infants don't get what they want, they scream until someone gives it to them. Well, Augustine points out shrewdly that no one would tolerate such behavior from him as an adult. I think we're pretty much with him at this point. But he loses a few of us when he says, "My behavior then [as a baby] was equally deserving of rebuke."

Yeah. He basically says there's not much moral difference between a baby crying for her mother's milk and the guy who sits down in a restaurant and commences to yell until someone brings him a dish that he likes. Both people are lashing out at the world until it gives them what they want. And so both people are proving that they're sinners. A tantrum is a tantrum is a tantrum in Augustine's ethical universe. Any questions?

Like I said, this isn't one of his more popular ideas. But I've done Easter mornings with small children, with the perfect little dresses and the tiny new shoes and the attending kicks and screams of appreciation. I know some of the parents here this morning will be thinking they've finally found a theologian who makes some sense.

But consider this. What bothers us is not anything Augustine says about how babies act. What bothers us is what he says sin is. What bothers us is that he seems to care so little about a person's intentions. He doesn't feel the need to give a crying baby a break just because she doesn't know any better. Sin is at work in her too, he says. It's not about knowing better.

Sorry. Pause game. I just wanted to note that I've used the word *sin* five times in this Easter sermon, and we're still on the first page. This hasn't happened in an Episcopal Church since 1952.

But, one thing I do know for sure is that we all need a great deal of help. And there is something buried in Augustine's idea that may actually give us a fuller understanding of the kind of help we need.

You see, I don't think Augustine was really trying to get us to think worse of infants. He was trying to show us that the source of what's wrong in us and in our world begins long before we have any capacity to choose.

A baby cries for her needs not because she's especially selfish. But because we come into this world vulnerable, hungry, cold. To be born is always one part lack and pain, no matter how much our parents wish it were not so. And when we hurt, we send some of that hurt back into the world. When someone wounds us, we can't help but send some of that wound back out as a scream or a kick or a passive aggressive little pout.

The kernel of wisdom in Augustine is that this process of being wounded and returning some of our pain to the world goes back even further. Back even beyond our births. It goes back through generations of families and friends. Back through petty grudges and rivalries. Old jealousies and losses and wars. Sin is not something we wake up one morning and decide to do. It is an old, old cycle of pain and vengeance we are caught in before we know we're alive. A cycle so old we have no idea who started it.

Maybe Christians use the metaphor of a father for God, because God is the one who leans over into the back seat of the human family station wagon and says, "I don't care who started it, people! I want it to stop! I just want this ancient cycle of violence to stop."

And on the first Easter morning, it did. Completely. It stopped.

The cycle of vengeance and violence that's been churning on across the centuries and the generations toward us had erupted in a familiar way. It got somebody killed. But this victim was different. It's not so much that he never did a bad thing. It's that this victim returned exactly none of the violence he'd been dealt. None of the pain. This victim somehow responded to the vengeful cycle that always leads to death, with nothing but divine life. With resurrection.

Of course the women were perplexed. They got to the tomb with their spices. They'd been taught how to tend to a dead body by their mothers and their mother's mothers. Tending to death, making some small sense of pain and loss, these are essential skills in a world that makes victims of us all soon enough.

The women were perplexed because they'd accepted the death of their friend as the way these things always end. But when they found the tomb empty, when the men in dazzling clothes asked why they looked for the living among the dead, what began to crumble was the sense that things could only be as they'd always been. The sense that violence would always and only lead to more violence, and death to more death.

And maybe strange things Jesus taught began to come into a fuller view. He'd said, "When you're slapped, see if you can step out of the cycle just a bit. Don't return the pain. Turn your cheek. When your coat is stolen, try not to get caught. Don't get revenge. Give the thief your cloak and be free."

He told us to love our enemies and to forgive people who persecute us. He also said, "You feel like a good person because you haven't murdered anybody. But you know the fist of rage that clenches in your chest when someone cuts you off on the interstate? That's what murder is made of. Same hateful stuff. It's your body responding to the hurts you've received with fuel for more hurt. You're caught. Don't be."

He taught these radical things to whoever would listen. And then, in his last week, he lived them out. He wouldn't let Pilate or the temple authorities or mocking soldiers or even his friends as they deserted him, one by one... He wouldn't let anyone caught in the ancient cycle of vengeance and fear define his responses. And so somehow, in him, the cycle of violence got no violence back. It ground, for this glorious once, to a halt.

When St. Paul told the Philippians, he wanted to "know Christ and the power of his resurrection," I used to think he wanted spiritual super powers. To heal the sick, speak in strange tongues, maybe even raise the dead.

But to know the power of the resurrection is to have one's life fired by a different energy. We know the way of vengeance and retribution that's shut up in our ancestral bones. We know about getting ours and getting even from the day we're born. But to know the power of Christ's resurrection is to live a life fired a little more fully by energy from the moment when God sent none of our violence back to us.

Friends, one thing I do know for sure is that we all need a great deal of help. And the help we need is for the cycle of sin we're caught in from birth and before, to come to a halt in us too. Imagine the freedom, the healing, the new life we could share right here, with one another and with our world, if it could.

Early on the morning of May 23, 1934, two notorious sinners walked into the Owl Cafe and sat down. The wait staff fidgeted until one of them ran back to the kitchen to find Bob Mitchell. "Mr. Mitchell," she said, "Bonnie and Clyde just walked in to the cafe. Bonnie and Clyde! What should we do?"

Having met Bob Mitchell at the top of this sermon, maybe his understated reply won't surprise you at all. "Serve 'em breakfast," is what he said. "Serve 'em breakfast."

A few hours later Bonnie and Clyde were ambushed by a posse in Bienville Parish. Their last meal seems to have been that breakfast at the Owl Cafe.

Sometimes we Christians talk about the resurrection like it was an ambush. A divine display of power that evil never had a chance against. I'm guessing this is why all the men thought the women's news from the tomb was just an idle tale. How could the cycle of death end in a new kind of life?

But when we look back at the life of this Jesus, when we look back at what he taught us, at how he lived, at how he died, how a new kind of life came to be...he doesn't seem to be offering us better ammunition to settle sin's score.

He offers us a different kind of help. Help our world needs today. He offers an energy for living whose source is not pain, but grace. Not vengeance, but forgiveness. Not death, but life. It's what we come to this table hungry for, week after week. Hungry because we are weary of living by the energies of revenge, and want to live by the power of one who took into his body all the pain there was to give and sent nothing back into this wounded old world but resurrection.