

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
4/5/2009, Palm Sunday  
Mark 14:1 -- 15:47

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

And there was one named Barabbas, which lay bound with them that had made insurrection with him, who had committed murder in the insurrection.(Mark 15:7, KJV)

It has been observed by preachers throughout the ages that of all folks who have ever lived on the face of this old earth, Barabbas is the one who could most plainly say, "Christ died for me." It is a good and pious saying, worthy of being repeated and taken to heart by each of us -- Christ died for me! -- and yet for Barabbas, of all people, its meaning was most sensible and most practical. The man was a felon. He might have thought his cause to be just, and the insurrection noble, yet in the pursuit of his cause he had killed someone -- perhaps even more than one. He had supposed that a human life was worth the trade... that he could swing his sword, plunge his knife, and let human blood flow...that such violence was worth it if by some means the insurrection could succeed and he could play his part. But the Roman Empire had quelled the insurrection and judged his killing to be murder.

And so it was that Barabbas was on his way to a murderer's execution, only, for some almost random reason, he was spared. The crowd called out for *his* release. Lo, he was set free as a pawn in the strategy designed to catch Jesus. Such things happen in chess, why not in reality: the pawn is bypassed for the sake of capturing the queen or even the king. Why, even the bishop or the knight can be set free for the sake of capturing the king. Barabbas was no bishop, and Barabbas was no knight, but he was set free so that the King might be taken!

I wonder whether Barabbas ever gave a moment's thought to this. I wonder whether in old age, when the blood lust of insurrection had calmed and the passions that could drive an explosive man to violence had cooled, I wonder then whether Barabbas ever thought back to those days when his life was spared so that Jesus might be killed. If so, and if he had heard the rumors that this Jesus had conquered death and risen to life again, I hope that Barabbas had permitted himself to be baptized and made himself Christ's man. For Barabbas had benefited from a blessed exchange. He had been headed for death, but spared at the last moment so that Jesus could take his place on Golgotha's cross. The judgment had been rendered, the writ of execution had been signed: "Condemned! Thou art condemned, Barabbas. This world no longer has room for you. We judge that we shall be better off without you. Begone! Begone from life!" Yet it was the character of Jesus that *he* would rather die than that Barabbas should die. Yes, if Barabbas had heard about the resurrection of Jesus, I hope he had become Christ's man and lived out his days in repentance, practicing love with whatever time was left him.

And I hope the same for you and for me, for we are the man! We are Barabbas!

Let me try to develop this idea by referring to one of America's greatest novels: Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Though our land is a young one, still we have made some wonderful contributions to world culture, especially to world literature. I count *The Scarlet Letter* as being one of our best gifts to the world.

The novel opens with young Hester Prynne in a similar situation to Barabbas. Judgment has been rendered, the writ has been signed, indeed she is commanded to wear her condemnation affixed to the clothing of her breast for the rest of her life: the letter A. The young woman has committed adultery. The proof lies right there in her arms: three-month old Pearl. Her elderly, scholarly husband is not here in Boston and has never been here. He is still off in Amsterdam, they say, or perhaps buried in the depths of the sea owing to some tragedy of the waves. So, her husband is not here, yet she became pregnant. She holds the child right in her arms.

And so it is that after her three months in prison, she is released to stand on the scaffold in the market place to be gazed upon by the righteous Puritan citizens of Boston.

There is creativity in her soul, and it takes form in her embroidery. On the breast of her gown, "in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A."<sup>1</sup> She wears an A, for she is an adulterous.

"She hath good skill at her needle, that's certain," remarked one of the female spectators; "but did ever a woman, before this brazen hussy, contrive such a way of showing it! Why, gossips, what is it but to laugh in the faces of our godly magistrates, and make a pride out of what they, worthy gentlemen, meant for a punishment."

And on they go, condemning Hester, except for one young mother, similar in age to Hester: "O, peace, neighbors, peace!" whispered their youngest companion. "Do not let her hear you! Not a stitch in that embroidered letter, but she has felt in her heart."<sup>2</sup>

That young neighbor is much nearer the truth than her older sisters who condemn Hester so much. And over the course of long lifetime, Hester wins the sympathy and finally the admiration of those New England folks because of her dignity and her deeds of compassion for many a person in those parts.

Hawthorne's story is much like the story of Jesus and the adulterous woman. The woman has done wrong, no doubt about that, yet Jesus shifts the focus away from her toward the men who would stone her:

<sup>4</sup>They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. <sup>5</sup>Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou? <sup>6</sup>This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not. <sup>7</sup>So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her. (John 8:4-7, KJV)

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<sup>1</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, with an Introduction and Notes by Nancy Stadel (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, paperback, 2005) page 46.

<sup>2</sup> Page 47.

Likewise, Hawthorne, in mercy upon the sinner, shifts the focus away from her toward the two men who have loved Hester but are not worthy of her: her elderly, vengeful husband and her young lover.

Now, here is my point, if the Puritan worthies could have their way, each of us would have a scarlet letter affixed to the breast of our tunic. And with justice! Perhaps it would be for us as it was for Hester, that by rights we wear a scarlet A, for we have committed adultery. Perhaps, alas, it might even be for us as it was with Barabbas of old, that affixed to our garment is a scarlet M, for we have committed murder, or short of it, we have killed another because of drunk driving or some other negligence you regret so very deeply. Certainly, each of would wear a scarlet S: sinner! We have done so much that is wrong, or left undone so much that is right. We have thought too much of ourselves, curved far too much of our strength and our thoughts toward our own benefit, to the neglect to God and of our neighbor. If the state of our souls could be made public and worn on our breast, there we would all be, making our way through this world with the Scarlet Letter blazing forth for all to see.

But we both grieve and rejoice today because Jesus took all those scarlet letters and riveted them to his own breast. If you can bring yourself to imagine the reality of the crown of thorns being pressed into his head and the spikes being pounded into his flesh, picture those daggers as driving our scarlet letters into *his* breast, that he might die the death we deserved, and that we might go free.

Free! What a sweet word! Jesus was willing to die that we might go free. Only let us not immediately turn around and trade our freedom for that weary old slavery to sin that so brought us down before and which made the Passion of our Lord so necessary in the first place. He has done a mighty thing for us. Let us not repay him with cold hearts, neither toward him nor toward any soul on this earth, for he died for each of them and he lives to save them all. And to him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.