

As many of you know, my husband and I are in the process of buying a new house here in Williamston. When I moved to Michigan last month, the only belongings I brought consisted of what we could fit in my car. Consequently, almost all of the necessary documents needed when buying a house are back in Maine. And, I had brilliantly put my Social Security card in what I thought was a safe place but then forgot to bring it with me to Michigan. Well, guess what? My husband has not been able to find it! So, last Monday morning I went to the Social Security office to get a replacement. Needless to say, I spent all morning there and found myself becoming increasingly frustrated and disturbed with each passing hour as I waited to hear my number called. I found myself thinking about **systems** as I felt caught in the trenches of a **system** that seemed complex and inefficient.

Systems thinking is the process of understanding how things, regarded as systems, influence one another within a whole and it can be applied to many facets of life. Our families are considered systems, government is a system, education is a system, healthcare is a system, religion often becomes a system, politics is a system, and we have a financial system that drives the way we live. The way we use power and

authority can become a system – unfortunately often a system of domination where we leverage power over others in a very unhealthy manner. The list goes on and on.... Each system is often made up of multiple smaller systems composed of inter-connected parts. And, the connections cause behavior of one part to affect another. Every day, each one of us is a player in multiple systems as we navigate our waking hours. Some systems can be very helpful, while others can be very harmful. One thing we soon discover about systems is that they are created to be self-perpetuating. And, consequently, it becomes very difficult to **break** a system or **break free from** a system.

Today we begin the last two weeks of our Lenten journey with another reading from the gospel of John, and we discover our focus is increasingly directed toward Jesus' crucifixion and the work of the cross. The writer of John's gospel has a large and very dramatic understanding of the work of the cross, an understanding in which the cross becomes the hour in which the Son of Man will be glorified. This "hour" represents the completion of Jesus' mission. And, in today's reading, John tells us that Jesus' crucifixion judges "the world" and drives **out** the "ruler of the world."

Last week the word used to describe *world* referred to the cosmos, to all of creation. However, this week, the word translated as *world* is **not**

synonymous with God's creation. Instead, it is describing the fallen realm that exists in estrangement from God and is organized in opposition to God's purposes, in opposition to God's dream for this world. The word *world* in today's reading from John, would better be described as a superhuman reality, a reality concretely embodied in structures and institutions that aggressively shape human life and hold human beings **captive** to their ways. The word we see translated as *world* would better be translated as "**the System**" with a capital S, the system of sin. And, in the gospel of John, this System is driven by a spirit or force, "the ruler of the world," whose ways are violence, domination and death.¹ In fact, theologian, Charles Campbell suggests that in today's reading, "the crucifixion **could** be interpreted as an exorcism in which the System is judged and its driving force ('ruler') is 'cast out' by means of the cross."²

On Sunday mornings when we speak the words of Confession and Forgiveness, we frequently say, "We are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves." Those words describe our captivity to systems that take us down the path of death rather than life. In our culture, many systems hold us captive. We are held captive to the system of consumerism as we

¹ David Brown; Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word* Year B, Volume 2 (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008),141.

² *Ibid.*, 141

consume and consume, all the while knowing that our consumption is killing others around the world, others who work in sweat shops so they can feed our insatiable appetites. We are held captive by hierarchies of winners and losers, systems that shape our behavior and thinking from birth to death. We are held captive to structures and systems that perpetuate racism, sexism and heterosexism. We are held captive by myths that shape our thinking and culture, myths that promote what some call “redemptive violence.” In fact, theologian Walter Wink has suggested that “redemptive violence” is the primary myth of the System as we try to bring order out of chaos through violently defeating “the other.” This myth is everywhere in culture – in video games, in movies, in our response to threats and terrorism. We even find this myth in cartoons. Remember the Popeye cartoons in which Popeye restores order by eating spinach and beating up Bluto?

Yes, we are held captive to systems, especially sin that becomes a system of domination within our very selves. And, Jesus, throughout his ministry and journey to the cross, enacted freedom **from** systemic myths and refused to respond to the domination and violence of the System.

Theologian, Marcus Borg, in his book *The God We Never Knew*, wrote:

“The point is not that Jesus was a good guy who accepted everybody, and

thus we should do the same (though that would be good). Rather, his teachings and behavior reflect an alternative social vision. Jesus was not talking about how to be good and how to behave within the framework of a domination system. He was a critic of the domination system itself.” In fact, Jesus’ freedom from systems of domination and his rejection of violence is what distinguishes his way from the way of the System.

In the gospel of John, Jesus’ death is **not** a matter of sadness. The cross is the purpose of his life, it is his mission, and he has been driven by this mission. And, that cross stands before **us** as a mirror as Jesus exposes the System for what it is. As we look to the cross, we begin to see the *world*, the System with a big S, for what it really is, the way of death, and we can then **begin** to find ourselves set free from its captivating ways. As we look to the cross, we are set free to die to a life that has been shaped by the System so that we can live fully into the way of Jesus, the way of life that truly matters.

Today, John’s gospel tells us Jesus’ hour has finally come and we follow Jesus to the cross. And, as we look to the cross, death is something we do not want to face. In fact, death is something we fear and do not want to talk about. However, God is taking us to the cross, taking us to the purpose for which Jesus came. God is taking us to the cross so we can

see **the** act of ultimate love for **all** of human existence. It is in the cross that we discover the source of love that sets us free, sets is free from the System of sin that imprisons us. And, it is in the cross where we discover that this love of the Crucified One is drawing **all** of humanity to God's very self.