

What makes this story all the more gripping is the honesty with which Matthew tells it. Whenever we tell the greatest stories of our lives, we like to tell how virtuous we were. But under the tragic story of the death of Jesus lies the shocking truth of how unvirtuous the apostles were: Judas betrays Jesus, collects money for it, and hangs himself in despair. Peter disbelieves the prediction of his denial, falls asleep with two other disciples when Jesus prays in agony, watches the trial when false witnesses testify, and finally denies Christ three times. One of the apostles takes up a sword and chops off an enemy's ear--a futile gesture of defense. And as a group, the apostles are no better: When Jesus announces that one of them will betray him, they all ask, "Is it I," as if they know they've done it before. When Peter says he would never deny Jesus, all the disciples agree. And when Jesus is finally arrested in the garden, they all abandon him and flee. When people tell a story of this magnitude, you expect them to doctor it up, but Matthew tells it like it is: the disciples blew it.

At our pancake breakfast this (tomorrow) morning the five of us who traveled to El Salvador last week will be telling you stories of our trip, and the proceeds from the breakfast will all benefit Comunidad Ita Maura. I'm going to tell one story up here because it reminds me so much of the apostles in the passion today. The Salvadorans we visited are poor farmers, members of a social class who have little property and power, but whose numbers are so large that the government persecuted them during a civil war to frighten them from trying to change the system. 75,000 Salvadorans were killed in the conflict, many of them family members of friends of the people in our sister parish, who fled to a refugee camp in another country, Honduras, where they lived in exile for two and a half years. They've been home two years now and the guns have fallen silent. To thank us for our visit they gave us a gift: a plaque honoring their dead. What shocked us was how they decorated the plaque: next to the inscription they affixed the broken shaft of a gun. Not the shaft of an enemy's gun to remind us how badly they were persecuted, but the shaft of one of their own guns, to confess to us that they sinned in this conflict as well.

Like the apostles in the story of the passion, our friends in El Salvador did not sugarcoat their responsibility for the tragedy. They told the truth, so we would know who they were--the sins of their past and their resolve for the future. We don't like to tell the truth about our past; often we hide the truth from ourselves, but when we admit we're wrong we can grow, and help others grow by our example.