

A sermon preached on Good Friday, April 19, 2019
at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT
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As you have listened and prayed with Jesus on his Good Friday walk through Jerusalem to the cross, what was stirred up in you?

We know the story, yet we can never fully comprehend all the dimensions of this day in the life of Jesus... in the unfolding of the human race... and in our personal journey through life with Christ.

As I ponder again the mysterious gift of Good Friday, I'm in awe of the injustice, the violence, the suffering, the prayerful forgiveness of Jesus as he lived and died for us and for the whole human race. I can't help but be filled with gratitude for Christ's courage, his faithful obedience and surrender to his Father's will as he was attacked by all the destructive powers of evil, sin and death. He was unjustly victimized by the powerful religious and political institutions of the day, he was abandoned by his best friends, his disciples... yet to the very end, he stayed faithful to his life mission of love and forgiveness for all, including his enemies and murderers.

These are themes that I'm drawn to every year, themes that Scripture, the Good Friday liturgy and hymns echo. What struck me in a new way this year is the connection between Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

On Maundy Thursday, as Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, he said, "I have given you an example that you also should do as I have done for you...I give you a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13: 15, 34)

Down through the centuries, Christians have paused on Good Friday to remember the heroic suffering and death of Christ for the salvation of the world. Yet, Jesus did not die for us to simply admire his heroic sacrifice for us and for the human race. He told us that he died "to give us an example" for how we are to live.

Jesus also said, "Take up your cross daily and follow me." Just as Jesus came to give his life in healing, forgiving love for all the broken, greedy, violent, self-centered people in this needy world...so Jesus put us here on earth to continue his quality of sacrificial, forgiving love for all the broken, greedy, violent, self-centered people in our world.

Let me say this a different way: If all we do today is remember and give thanks for Christ's sacrificial death, then we have only grasped one part of Christ's Good Friday message. Christ was also trying to communicate something much more challenging. Christ wants us to look at his Good Friday death and to ask ourselves...in what ways is Jesus asking you and me to practice his sacrificial, forgiving love for others, including our enemies and those who treat us and others unjustly in our generation?

Do you see what a different perspective this gives us as we look at Christ on the cross today?

This week I heard a woman talk about her struggles with how to think, pray and live with politicians and business leaders in this generation who are so cruel, violent, unjust in their words and actions toward vulnerable people in our nation and world. She spoke of her struggles to be a person of love and forgiveness in the face of everything that is contrary to the way she believes God created us to live. In her struggles, she was embracing what Jesus wanted us to wrestle with on Good Friday. How do we practice Christ-like love as we live in the midst of injustice and violence and corrupt self-serving religious, political, business and financial institutions?

There were times when Jesus lovingly spoke very direct truth to power: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesars’ and to God the things that are God’s”... “You cannot serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and money”... “The way you treat the poorest, the most vulnerable, the least of the people around you is the way you are treating me...for I love them and dwell in them.”

Jesus was relentless in saying, love all your neighbors as you love yourself. He practiced loving people who were considered outcasts in his generation: women, children, prostitutes, people of other races, nations and religions, tax collectors, widows, strangers, outsiders.

There were times when Jesus spoke and acted very publicly to lovingly defend, heal and help the poor, the sick and victims of unjust political and religious institutions. There are times when Jesus will call us to lovingly speak out and act very publicly in opposition to injustice, evil, and violence.

At other times Jesus quietly, out of the limelight, brought healing love to outcasts.

At times, like Good Friday, Jesus was simply present and allowed the injustice of powerful institutions to beat, mock and kill him, while Jesus continued to stay grounded in love and forgiveness for them...and for the thief who was crucified next to him and asked for his help.

When we hear Jesus’s Good Friday message inviting us to love people in our generation as he loved people in his generation...we are drawn into the greatest challenge of our lives. How are we to live and love the Jesus way? We can’t do it, without the moment by moment guidance, strength, wisdom, courage which Jesus found from his relationship with his Heavenly Father. It was through his struggle and prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane that Jesus was given strength to live with courageous grace through Good Friday.

If we are to follow the example of Jesus and take up our cross in this generation as Jesus did in his, it will require us to grow closer to Jesus, to listen more intently every day to the guidance of his Word and Spirit, to receive grace and strength from his Body and Blood and from Christian community.

We never know when and how the quality of our love and forgiveness will be tested.

A few weeks ago, Rebecca and I were in Lancaster, PA. While we were there, we were reminded of the tragic events of Oct 2, 2006 when a man walked into an Amish one room school house in nearby Nickel Mines and shot 8 young girls, killing 5 before he took his own life.

That same day, a group of Amish men visited the shooter's widow to express their concern for her and her children, and to express their forgiveness for what her husband had done to their children. One Amish man held the shooter's sobbing father in his arms for over an hour to comfort him. About 30 members of the Amish community attended the funeral of the shooter to show their forgiving love and support for his widow and family.

Those Amish families felt overwhelming grief and loss and trauma. They were not in denial. Yet, as followers of Jesus, the Amish way is to practice daily, living the love and forgiveness of Jesus on the Cross, in the way they treat each other and the people around them. They would be the first to say, they don't follow the Jesus way perfectly. They often fail, but they intentionally practice loving, forgiving, seeking reconciliation in little interactions every day. So, as a result of their daily practice, under the horrific stress of the loss of their children, they were given grace to again love and forgive as Jesus did on the cross.

A few days after this tragic violence, I attended an Interfaith gathering. I sat at a table with four Muslims and 3 Jews and a Roman Catholic. When the table groups were asked to have some conversation, the Muslims were the first to respond, with great animation. They spoke of their amazement at the way the Amish Christians responded to the killing of their children. They said, "We've heard you Christians talk about forgiveness, but we've never seen you actually practice it. Now that we see what forgiveness can do, we can imagine what a difference it would make to the whole world if people caught in violent, unjust situations could forgive the perpetrators of violence. That could literally change the world."

Again today, Jesus invites us to join with him in changing the world by the quality of our love and forgiveness. May our reflection on Christ's example this Good Friday inspire us to give thanks for Christ's extraordinary, sacrificial, loving obedience to God's will and call in the face of evil, sin and death ...and at the same time, inspire us to ask him to help us take little steps every day to act as Jesus did, with relentless love and forgiveness in the face of injustice, violence and evil in our generation.

Let us pray. In the silence, I invite you to talk with Jesus about your response to this question: With what person or in what situation is Jesus inviting you to take another step in the process of practicing God's love and forgiveness on this Good Friday?

O Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair hope, where there is darkness, light, where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.