

“Dying or Rising?”
The Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year A
John 17:1-11

“I don’t like your cross!”

That’s what he said, the first time he came to visit the parish where I serve as pastor. He walked around the church, looked at everything, and then he said to me, “I don’t like your cross.”

Now, our church was built 12 years ago. I think it’s beautiful.

And I happen to love the large cross which is a focal point in our space. It’s actually a crucifix. It hangs over the altar, suspended by wires from the ceiling. The cross itself is made of wood and brass. The image of Christ’s body is fashioned out of bronze. As you enter our church, it looks like the body of Jesus is attached to the cross. But if you look at it from the side, you realize that there is about this much space between the cross and the bronze sculpture of Jesus’ body.

Our visitor said he didn’t like it. So I asked him: “What don’t you like?”

He said, “Well, just look at it! From one angle, it looks like Jesus is dying. It’s a good depiction of Jesus dying on the cross.”

“But,” he continued, “If you look at it from a different angle, you can see there is space between him and the cross. Is he going on to the cross, or is he coming off?”

He threw up his hands and said, “So tell me – is Jesus dying or rising on that cross?”

And I said to him: *“maybe it’s both. It all depends on how you look at it.”*

In our passage from John’s Gospel today, Jesus is speaking to his disciples on the night before he died. Within 18 hours or so, he will be hanging on the cross.

And as we read of the crucifixion in John’s Gospel, we could ask this question: What is happening to Jesus as he hangs on the cross? Is he dying, or rising?

Quite frankly, the answer according to John’s Gospel is: *both*. According John’s Gospel, the crucifixion is the most tragic death in history, AND it is the moment when the glory of God, revealed in Christ, shines forth for all to see.

It all depends on how you look at it.

On one hand, what happens to Jesus from Holy Thursday night to Good Friday afternoon

is the worst possible thing.

Jesus had proclaimed the glorious freedom of the children of God – then a crowd of thugs tracked him down in Gethsemane, tied him up, threw him in jail.

Jesus had shown us so much love – and humanity responded with so much hate.

He used his hands to heal – we nailed his hands to a tree.

He revealed the heart of God to all humanity – we thrust a spear into his heart.

Jesus said that he had received glory from the Father, and had shown that glory to us. On the cross, he dies an inglorious death, a convicted criminal dying between other criminals.

Jesus had proclaimed, “I am the way, and the truth, and the *life!*”

All this talk about *life*... then on that Friday, there was nothing but the stench of death. Jesus’ birth was accompanied by an angelic song – glory to God in the highest! Now this Jesus dies on a cross.

Dying for our sins.

There he was – dying, because death had to be conquered.

What was he doing up there? He was *dying*.

And... he was rising.

In John’s Gospel, the passion of Jesus – the whole story of his arrest, trial and crucifixion - is portrayed in such a way that you come away understanding that this was also Jesus’ finest hour!

Jesus’ finest hour – were you listening to the language in today’s Gospel passage? Sitting there at the Last Supper, Judas has already run out into the night to betray him. Jesus has washed the dirty feet of his friends and shared the meal of bread and wine he asks US to share in memory of him.

And then, with betrayal and death hanging over the scene, Jesus speaks of... glory!
“Father, the hour has come. Glorify your son, so that the Son may glorify you.”

Wait. What? The brutal crucifixion will take place in a few hours. How is this the hour of glory?

Jesus says his Father, “I did the work you sent me to do. I had glory in your presence before the world began. I’ve made your name know. Everything I’ve given to people I

received from you. And now I am glorified in them.”

Death is on the horizon. Yet all this talk of glory?

Yes, in John’s Gospel, THIS is the hour, this is Jesus’s finest hour, this is the hour when God’s glory is revealed in the Son. As John tells the story of Jesus’ passion, he portrays a Jesus who is dignified, directing the action, making sure that everything goes as it should.

In John’s Gospel,

- + when they come to arrest Jesus, he calmly directs every moment of the interaction
- + when falsely accused, Jesus does not argue: he stands in truthful silence
- + in John’s Gospel, Jesus carries the cross by himself – he needs no assistance
- + from the cross, Jesus entrusts his mother to the care of a disciple. Even in his hour of greatest suffering, he is caring for his loved ones
- + and when all is properly concluded, he does not scream out with fear or pain. Rather he calmly announces, “It is finished.” And he hands his spirit over to his Father.

This is not a depiction of a frightened victim being hunted down by death. This is a depiction of the Son of God, who knows that this suffering is not as strong as God’s love for him. He knows that the glory of God’s love is revealed when we see that God is willing to suffer with us, for us. Jesus knows that death will not get the last word in the story of his life. Jesus faces a death that *is real*, but he does so with courage, because he knows that eternal life is even *realer*.....

On the cross, in John’s Gospel, he is dying AND rising.

It all depends on how you look at it!

And this is *crucial* for our life, and the life of the world.

Why? Because, right now, the cross is still happening to people. The crucifixion is still happening:

- + It is still happening, in hospital rooms, where someone struggles to breathe
- + it is still happening in places around the world, where quarantines force us to experience isolation
- + it is still happening, wherever uncertainty leads to fear, wherever economic hardships lead to anxiety, wherever loneliness leads to suffering
- + the crucifixion still happens, where poverty saps the spirit, where racism breeds hate, where immorality gets rewarded.

In so many situations *we are dying*. Death is real. Suffering is staggering.

When people are on these crosses, they are experiencing dying.

But, if we approach these crosses from a slightly different angle - the angle revealed in the Gospel of John - we may begin to realize that, even in our moments of greatest loss, *the rising of God* is at work, the glory of God is present, and can be seen.

The glorious rising of God can be seen:

- + when frightening circumstances lead people to a greater commitment to love
- + when lonely moments lead us to reach out to others who may be in need.
- + when an atmosphere of despair leads you to create a reason for others to hope
- + when an unprecedented health crisis leads so many of us to reexamine our priorities, our relationships; to strengthen our commitment to the living God.

And when you and I are the ones who feel like *we* are experiencing the cross, the Risen Jesus enable us to *choose* – to choose be people who rise even as we feel that part of us is dying.

In the Easter Season of the year 2020, we must look at everything through the lens of the cross, and unite everything that is happening to us to what happened to Jesus. He will teach us how to look at our life. He will teach us, seriously, to be “cross-eyed.” *Cross-eyed people*. People who view every moment through the prism of the *cross*. Cross-eyed people, who see that even our darkest night might be our most glorious hour.

So, people of God... are you dying, or are you rising? I think it's both. It all depends on how you look at it.

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