



SERMONS THAT WORK

Good Friday

Beloved

[RCL]: Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25 or Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42

Today is a day that weighs heavy on the church. Each year during Holy Week, we hear the passion narrative; each year we resuscitate those familiar feelings, the anguish and disbelief, that accompany Jesus' death. And yet, each year it strikes differently. This year, the weight feels like nearly too much to bear. It feels like salt rubbed into a fresh wound, because this year, the death of our Lord is piled atop the personal and communal loss borne out of a pandemic and our gridlocked social-political landscape. Nevertheless, there is good news here, if we have ears to hear.

Details are in dizzying supply in John's passion narrative. There is the bloody sweat and Joseph of Arimathea's angling for Jesus' corpse. There is Pilate's existential question: *what is truth?*, and the people's insistence that a bandit go free while Jesus stands condemned. There is the haunting mention that both the betrayal and burial take place in a garden, and the curious fact that it is mostly women who are named (and mostly named Mary) at the crucifixion.

These details, and so many others, buttress and ornament the dominant fact: they crucified him. So, with all the richness that drips from these two chapters, the central symbol remains straightforwardly the cross. It is the cross that bears down upon the church this day, even as the beams bore down on Jesus as he trekked up to Golgotha some two millennia ago. Like it or not, the cross has become powerful shorthand for our shared faith, for identifying something or someone recognizably Christian.

But the cross is a strange symbol to mark a people and a way, because it is a jarringly evocative reminder of death and defeat. Even that is softened a bit. To put a finer point on it: the cross was viewed as an instrument of government-sanctioned torture, of public humiliation and shame. Those who were crucified were made an example of; their death was seen as a horrifying, inhumane spectacle done to deter criminal activity.

It seems strange, if not a bit macabre, to display that in our places and spaces of worship. But the church has since its beginnings. It seems stranger still to plaster such a contentious image on bumper stickers and signs and turn it into necklaces. But that too has become increasingly common for many of faith. How do we in the church explain the cross? How can we, with the Apostle Paul, uphold it as the lynchpin of faith, the primary focus of preaching, the power to save for all who can stomach it?

How exactly the cross is the power to save has created something of a stumbling block for centuries in the church. In trying to make sense of the crucifixion, theologians and well-intending faithful folks have sought to unearth and reconstruct the scandalous logic of Jesus' death. Language of divine exchange and satisfaction, righteousness, and atonement populate theory after theory, all in hopes of unpacking precisely what the crucifixion affects and seeking to answer the question of why Jesus had to die.

The question of why Jesus had to die is, of course, tied to why he was killed in the first place. And why Jesus was killed certainly seems to stem from the things he said and did (or failed to say and do), specifically things having to do with the kingdom of God. Throughout the gospels, this kingdom is said to uphold and elevate those on the dark underbelly of society, those who were sick and poor and downtrodden. For those on the fringes in the earthly kingdom, the news had to sound promising. But for those in power, who brokered political and religious authority, the presence of this kingdom of God threatened to undermine the existing structures of power and domination.

Not only did Jesus announce the kingdom of God, he made that kingdom—one not of this world, he says repeatedly—a reality. It is a kingdom that trades in healing and grace, that runs on deeds of generous hospitality and God's justice. It was something unlike anything the world had ever witnessed. Maybe this is why those around Jesus had such difficulty in understanding the character and author of this kingdom. Maybe this was why Pilate asked questions like, "Are you the King of the Jews?" and "Where are you from?"

Jesus' answers (or non-answers) to these questions are wholly unsatisfying to Pilate's ears; the pieces fail to add up. Exasperated, he washes his hands of Jesus' fate, leaving it to the will of the people. The remainder of the story comes too easily to mind. It comes too easily to mind because it is the story that plays throughout our days. The one in which one day we stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the crowd, triumphantly shouting, "Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord!", only to join in with the chorus a short time later, screaming, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" It is the same story that recounts how we will, at once, lay our cloaks down on a colt or on the street, paving the way for the unsuspecting king of kings, and in the next breath bid and barter for Jesus' clothes.

Still, Jesus did not shirk his mission and message. Right up until the end, he taught as one with authority, equipped with loving confidence in the One who sent him. Jesus was bound to incarnate God's love and presence in and for the world, and nothing, not even our fickleness, could disrupt that.

All of this reiterates the fact that we, as earth-bound humans, do not know what to do with love when we see it in its purest expression. We might curiously welcome it, poke and prod it. We might ask questions of it, try to tame and domesticate it. And yet, in the end, we are left searching still, so we kill it. Love is what got Jesus killed.

Perhaps this is what is so heart-rending about the cross. The cross reminds us of what we have made inevitable; it shows us, as Herbert McCabe has said, the “ultimate sin”: how we can take life and love and contort it, make it dangerous, even fatal. But the cross also serves as a window into the heart of God, and as such, it is the central symbol of our forgiveness. At the cross, we see God’s utter commitment to a world so-often ambivalent to that love.

The cross communicates the deepest and most profound truth of the Christian tradition: you are loved by the God whose eternal power is love. When you fail to feel it or receive or return it, you are loved. When you buck against God’s embrace like a two-year-old’s late-afternoon tantrum, you are loved. When you avert your eyes from the Lord’s outstretched arms on the cross, the most perfect expression of love—when you turn your gaze from it, from him—you are loved still.

This day, we behold our God, our Lord, who loved his own to the point of death. We see again the agonizingly beautiful continuation of a sacrificial life solely lived in and through love. The church is invited to cast its eyes upon the cross this day, remembering afresh the sobering terminal diagnosis and the life-giving possibility of love’s way. Might we look anew on the one crucified to lead and educate us on this way. *Amen.*

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