

Sermon: Good Friday

The Rev. Mike Wernick

March 30, 2018

Year B

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Psalm 22

Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9

John 18:1-19:42

Pontius Pilate had a luxurious... expensive palace at Caesarea... you know... right on the sea... he probably had slaves... or servants aplenty... to do all that needed to be done... and the sunsets over the Mediterranean must have been lovely... but he had to leave all that splendor at the Passover... and trek on down to Jerusalem... with the troops... to make a show of Rome's military force... and to use that force... if needed... to keep the peace... because normally... during most of the year... the population of Jerusalem was only about 30,000... but at the Passover... when sacrifice was expected... when Jews from all over Israel... and perhaps across the entire region... came to fulfill their obligations... the population swelled to more than 200,000... with most people camping outside Jerusalem's walls on whatever piece of empty... rocky ground they could find...

When the population was on the small side... there was an ever present threat of riots... of revolt... of some kind of uprising... because of Rome's oppressive presence in a Jewish place... but when it surged to almost seven times more than that... the risk was that much greater... and Jerusalem became something of a tinderbox... just waiting to explode... but Rome was ready to use its most effective deterrent... not water boarding... not sleep deprivation... not uninterrupted loud music... not prolonged solitary confinement... or the threat of harm to one's family... as has been reported at Guantanamo Bay... but the threat of crucifixion... to control those under its thumb...

There were others... well... the Greco-Roman gods... who were thought to have the people under their thumbs... these gods were all-powerful... all-seeing... but also capricious... unpredictable... temperamental... and there was nothing in that

pantheon... nothing in the Roman mindset... that could connect crucifixion... nothing that could anticipate connecting crucifixion... with religion...

This past Sunday... we heard a portion of Philippians... about how Jesus did not consider equality with God as something to exploit... but he emptied himself... and took the form of a slave... and it brings to mind the honor / shame dynamic which existed then... the Lutheran professors on the Working Preacher website... said that everyone then... had a kind of honor / shame quotient... kind of like the FICO credit scores we have today... but unlike our scores which are private... everyone's honor / shame quotient was more public knowledge... and people tried to associate themselves with successful people... or distanced themselves from those who brought shame on themselves or their families... and careers were made or ruined... based on how well one could position oneself... you knew you were well in the black... if a parade was thrown in your honor... like Pilate's... and you knew that crucifixion... which put you into the red... was literally... being shamed to death...

And what happens when the church challenges Empire... what happens when hubris replaces humility... when those who gain power... maybe... *perhaps* through data mining... or who are elected to protect the common good... end up being more interested in protecting their own power and their own good... it usually doesn't end well... because while the Gospel may not be partisan... it is certainly political...

In his book [How the Death of Jesus was Remembered](#)... Dr. Arthur Dewey wrote that... *crucifixion was intended to erase all memory of... and any trace... of the crucified one... crucifixion was considered such a shameful and unbearable act of humiliation... that it repelled one's mind from returning to it... or to the person executed...*

But in the first centuries after Jesus' death... early Christian art depicts Jesus as a healer... a teacher... and at table... there are no early images of Jesus crucified... those come later... and this is not to diminish the importance of Jesus's death and how

he was killed... but it does underscore that the early followers of Jesus wanted him to be remembered for how he lived... he was a healer... a teacher... one who practiced open table... it was how Jesus lived that was paramount for his followers... it was the power of the person of Jesus... Jesus the human being... what he accomplished in his lifetime and what he inspired in others... that brought to a grinding halt... the attempt of that machinery of death... to annihilate him and his vision for a better world... the church just simply refused to forget Jesus' message...

But here's the thing... collectively... we are capable of challenging Empire and choosing to do God's will... though Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann has claimed that "The Gospel has gotten all tangled up in a white western sense of entitlement." And Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sachs has said that "In Judaism, faith is not acceptance, but protest against the world that is, in the name of the world that ought to be."

So today... I am reminded about the Theology of the Cross... and the Theology of Glory... because the cross always calls glory into question... the theology of the true self... always calls the theology of the false self into question... and it seems that in our time... far too many of us are caught between the two...

We are enamored by the Theology of Glory... and we pursue the wealth... power... possessions... and beauty... that the world honors... we look for ways to make our small good deeds into mountains... and our many selfish deeds into pebbles... we look for ways to bolster ourselves at the expense of others... but the prosperity Gospel of preachers like Joel Osteen is not a Theology of the Cross... claiming you built it all on your own and did it all by yourself is not a Theology of the Cross... doing what it takes to make sure you come out on top is not a Theology of the Cross... passing everyone you can on the highway... so you can be first... is not a Theology of the Cross... we are called to empty ourselves... as Jesus did... in many ways... we are called to the foot of the Cross... we are called to care for the least and the lost and the last... but our culture rejects the powerless... the poverty... the messiness of life... even while we rest at the

foot of the Cross... but part of the theology of the Cross is resisting the urge to look away... and ask... not why would God let this happen... but why would we let this happen...

The cross has become the symbol for Christianity... something which had never been associated with any religion has become the primary symbol of our faith... even though... according to the world... it is a symbol for losers... the symbols with which we adorn ourselves and our churches... bear witness that we are losers... but all we lose... is the world's idea of glory...

Jesus said in Mark 8:35... *For those who want to save their life will lose it... and those who lose their life for my sake... and for the sake of the Gospel... will save it... for what will it profit them to gain the whole world... and forfeit their life...* and I would add... that when you lose your life... you also lose your heart...

So when we get out of our palaces... we must to look at the Cross... without turning away... but not only look at the suffering in the world... at poverty and dis-ease... at hunger... at economic injustice... at gun violence... at racism... and all forms of discrimination and social injustice... but use the power we have to contend with them... to work towards eradicating them... not only with our thoughts and prayers... not only through what we say... but through what we do... by the rallies and marches we attend... by being educated about the issues... and by how we vote... when we do this... we move a little bit closer to the Theology of the Cross... and a little bit closer to God's Glory...

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