

Sermon: Good Friday

The Rev. Mike Wernick

April 3, 2015

Year B

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Psalm 22

Hebrews 10:16-25

John 18:1-19:42

Year after year... during Holy Week... we read the Passion Narratives about Jesus' last day... in some small ways... we identify with his suffering... because we have all suffered... in some small ways... we consider how like Peter... we have denied Christ... and might still resist the boundless mind of Christ... so that we can keep a part of ourselves in the wings... so that if God doesn't provide what we need or want... we can just do it ourselves... than you very much...

In our Passion reading... we wrestle with a tsunami of anti-Judaism that has been building momentum for almost two thousand years... a tsunami that blames Jews for Jesus' death... that has fueled more horrific violence than our knowing hearts could bear... I remember one of my classmates in third or fourth grade telling me... that I killed Jesus... but in that blame... there's an unspoken... almost illogical question... what would have happened if Jesus hadn't been killed... how would that inform the atonement theology we've inherited... can we imagine Jesus growing old... would he have died of natural causes... would he have become vulnerable...

In her TED talk on vulnerability... that I spoke about on March 22... Brené Brown says that religion has moved from faith and mystery... to certainty... *I'm right... you're wrong... shut up*... that we try with almost every fibre of our being... to make everything certain so we can avoid vulnerability... and the more afraid we are... the more vulnerable we become... and the more afraid we are... and fear turns into blame...

Brown shares that blame is defined in the literature... as a way to discharge pain and discomfort... so when I can blame you for something... like killing Jesus... I can feel more comfortable... more confident about myself or my opinions...

The common Christian reading of the Bible is that Jesus *died for our sins*... either to pay a debt to the devil... a theme which was developed in the first millennium... or to pay a debt to the Father... an idea proposed by St. Anselm of Canterbury...

But the Franciscan philosopher and theologian John Duns Scotus agreed with neither of these understandings... Scotus was not formed by the Jerusalem Temple's language of debt... atonement... or blood sacrifice... but he was inspired by the high-level cosmic hymns in the first chapters of Colossians and Ephesians... and in the first chapter of John's Gospel...

Unfortunately... since Anselm... Christians have paid a huge price for what theologians call substitutionary atonement... the idea that before God could love us... God needed Jesus to be a blood sacrifice to atone for our sin-drenched humanity...

With *that view*... salvation depends on a *problem*... instead of a divine proclamation about the basic nature of reality... as if a God who created everything... could need a payment... and a very violent one at that... before being able to love and accept God's own children... but this was a message that those with angry... distant... absent... or abusive fathers... were already far too programmed and ready to believe...

For Scotus... God's incarnation and the world's redemption could *only* be... the proactive work of God from the very beginning... the hymn in Ephesians 1:4 sings that... *God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love*... and based on this... only perfect love and God's desire to reveal God's self... could have motivated the incarnation... and not the need to forgive our sins...

And so... Scotus believed... Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about us... but to change our minds about God... because God in Christ... incarnate as Jesus... moved people beyond the counting... weighing... and punishing model that the ego prefers... the good / bad... right / wrong... in / out of the binary mind... Jesus undid

once and for all... all notions of human and animal sacrifice and replaced them with a new economy of grace... a new economy of unity... which is at the very heart of the Gospel's revolution...

Chaplain David Keck wrote in the Christian Century magazine: the Gospel text is full of people who are certain of themselves... or who put on a show of being certain... they were certain that entering the Roman headquarters would defile a devout Jew... yet... handing the Word of God over to death does not... Jesus was meant to be a game changer for the human psyche... and for religion itself... but when we remain focused on sin... we fail to see that Jesus was pointing us toward God's solidarity... with the vulnerability and suffering of all creation...

And this really changes everything... because it so deeply challenges the notions of power and certainty that engulf us... and in which we're drowning... it opens us up to a new starting point... and if we change the starting point... we change the trajectory... if we understand that Jesus died to show us what *love in action* looks like... then all we need to know is that God does not love us because we are good... God loves us because God is good... and there's nothing we can ever do that will decrease or increase God's eternal eagerness to love us... so as we move beyond blame and certainty... as we embrace God's Mystery... and a responsibility for our own actions... let's reflect on how we live out *our* Passion...

What do we think... or feel... is killing us... to what are we bound... and how might we ask our communities to unbind us... the way Jesus asked those in Lazarus' community to unbind him... in what tombs do we find ourselves today... and how might we break out of them... and how might we die to all the things that hold us back... how might we move through our own deaths... and find new and abundant life... both here... and in the age to come...

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