

Sermon: Holy Cross Day

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Year A
Isaiah 45:21-25
Psalm 98
Philippians 2:5-11
John 12:31-36a

Why do we remember Holy Cross Day... why do we commemorate it as a Feast Day... what makes the cross holy... how does an instrument of torture and death become sanctified... made holy... is it made holy by some kind of magic... did something happen there that defies the laws of physics... or did what happened there... reveal a deeper understanding about the incarnation... reveal a deeper understanding about us... and God's love...

And what would it mean... if collectively... corporately... globally... we consistently lived out that love... what would it mean if everyone who values the sanctity of life... was also vehemently against the death penalty... what would it mean if all those men who support women working outside of the home... also supported equal pay for equal work... what would it mean if those who were against child labor... also refused to buy clothing made by children in third-world sweat shops...

I think the Cross is holy... because the kind of death which occurred on it... was not just crucifixion... the kind of death which occurred on it... transcended the world's sensibilities... v. 32 is the third prediction of the lifting up of Jesus... and the double meaning of "lifted up" remains at play here... to be lifted up from the earth can be read as a description of the physical act of crucifixion... but it can also be read as a description of Jesus' ascension and his return to God... the positive effect of Jesus' hour... is described in sweeping terms by drawing ALL people to himself... but it is people's response to this offer that sets limits... not Jesus himself...

And some of our limits... are that we live in silos... we insulate our lives from the things which inconvenience us... and only open them to the things which benefit us... for example... we seek the cheapest prices for our flat screen ultra-high-definition smart

TVs... but want to pay those who manufacture them as little as possible... we want our health insurance to cost as little as possible... but don't set limits on CEOs' exorbitant salaries... we want to own two houses... but have difficulty paying our neighbors a living-wage... our fragmented communities exhibit little accountability... we want government to keep it's nose out of our business... except when disaster strikes... then we want government aid... and we don't care where it comes from...

But Philippians 2:4-6 exhorts us... *Let each of you look not to your own interests... but to the interests of others... let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus... who... though he was in the form of God... did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited... equality with God was not a thing to be exploited...*

I mean... why would you exploit being equal to God... if you're God... you're God... and where's the proof in this pudding... Jesus did not Lord being God over them... and even on the cross... Jesus did not hold a grudge... he said... *Father forgive them...* holding a grudge is not the mind of Christ...

John 12: 24-25... *Very truly... I tell you... unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies... it remains just a single grain... but if it dies... it bears much fruit... those who love their lives more than they love eternal life... will lose them... and those who love their lives in this world less... will keep them for eternal life...*

I remember one of my third-grade classmates telling me... that as a Jew... I killed Jesus... but Jesus was murdered... not because of my Jewish-ness... not because of my personal sins... or because I had not yet decided to follow The Way of Jesus... Jesus was murdered because of our corporate sin... because humanity is sinful... because we miss the fully human mark for which God created us...

We remember Holy Cross Day... because what happened there showed us what love in action looks like... we commemorate Holy Cross Day... because we too can be lifted up... and can know the Peace which passes understanding...

But most churches... most people... understand what happened on the cross... as one of three atonement theologies... and based on the writings of one of the authors assigned us at Trinity Lutheran Seminary... Jesus' death is understood either... (1) as an act of ransom that bought the world its freedom from sin and death... or (2) that Jesus died in our place to atone for human guilt and sin... or (3) as a model of moral behavior because it revealed how much God loves us...

But none of these... presents a theory of salvation that's in line with what John offers... for example... in John 10:1-21... in the discourse about the thieves and the bandits... and the shepherd and the sheep and the sheepfold... Jesus makes it quite clear... that he is not a victim in his death... but is in complete control... and the French theologian Abelard... offers a theology of Jesus' death... as a demonstration of God's love... why just a few chapters later... in John 15:12-13... Jesus says... *love one another... and no one has greater love than this... than to lay down one's life for one's friends...*

So when we read John... it's important to remember... that while most conversations in North American churches... place models of reconciliation under the umbrella of "sacrifice"... for John... theologies of atonement... are really theologies of reconciliation... what Jesus says in today's Gospel... and in the preceding eight verses... suggest an alternative model of reconciliation that is built around the restoration of relationship...

In the synoptic Gospels... discipleship is defined as taking up one's cross... but in John... discipleship is defined as serving Jesus... and that definition makes it clear that the goal of such service... is a restored relationship with God in Christ...

Most of the world's leaders try to ensure peace by creating a military deterrent... but like the *Pax Romana*... this is only the kind of peace that the world can give... and because it's in opposition to Jesus... it's judged by Jesus's death... and Jesus' death has this effect not because it's a sacrifice to atone for human sin... but because it reveals the decisive power and promise of God... and God's love... to the world...

But there's a note of tension in this revelation... because for Jesus' death to effect reconciliation with God... one must make a decision to trust Jesus... that is... reconciliation is offered to all people... but the offer must be accepted... and this aspect is lacking in other atonement theologies...

The New Interpreters Bible Commentary says... that the heart of the Johannine understanding of the death of Jesus... is the recognition that it is of a piece with the life of Jesus... Jesus' death is an expression of his relationship with God... which began "at the beginning"... for the Fourth Gospel then... a theology of reconciliation cannot focus exclusively on the death of Jesus... but on the incarnation itself... the life... death... and resurrection of Jesus... and on the loving interrelationship of Jesus with God that the incarnation reveals... and the decision to trust Jesus... is the decision to become a partner in that relationship... in that community that is bound to God and Jesus... as they are bound to each other... and that the relationship of those in the community... is simply an extension of the relationship that God and Jesus share...

But growing into this kind of relationship doesn't happen overnight... within the first year or two of ordination... I used to feel really frustrated that it's been 2,000 years since Jesus was here... and look at how things still are... but really... if it was so easy for us to heal ourselves individually and corporately... and to heal the world... we'd have moved on to something else by now... so maybe this is a 40 or 50,000 year program... and like those who built the great cathedrals of Europe... we do our little parts while we're here...

The Good News... is that God is OK with us taking our time... sometimes dragging our feet... with our myopic vision... with minimizing or denying what's right in front of us... and even with the ignorance which allows us not to change... because for God... what happened on the cross... the forgiveness Jesus pronounced on the cross... and God's patience in waiting for us to decide to trust the offer of total reconciliation... gives us all the time we need...

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