

Good Friday
Church of the Advent
March 30, 2018

As I was looking for inspiration for something to say to you today, something else that needs to be said during this solemn and spare liturgy that has already said what needs to be said, I wandered to a lot of places. There is *not* a lot of inspiring material out there for Good Friday, though I did come across someone who tried to establish the reason it is called *Good Friday*, because from the perspective of the world we live in, the irony is not lost that there is not much *good* about it. The most plausible explanation comes from some ancient linguistic shift from *Holy* Friday, which might be more appropriate, but then not as many people would get the day off.

For much of my life, particularly during the time I was un-churched, I had a vague notion that Good Friday was a kind of ticket that had to be purchased to get to an Easter that meant more than a 3-day weekend, or hiding the secret baskets of candy with just the right stuffed bunny. For years I never bought that ticket, thinking it wise to avoid its historical messages of guilt and shame and atonement through a gruesome death I was made to feel responsible for; and so every year all this weekend amounted to—as it does for many in our world—was a celebration of Spring, some new clothes and shoes, and perhaps a family dinner that involved ham.

Though my life is a lot different now, and my perspective has changed, I confess I still wrestle with Good Friday. Dwelling on the death by crucifixion of Jesus, who suffered for bearing a message of radical love, still disturbs me, because it asks something of me that makes me irritable. I want to be gracious and grateful and repentant and pious, and yet I find myself in spiritual flight away from responding to a gift I have not earned and do not deserve. Surely God's death on a cross demands something of me—yet because I am certain that nothing I have would suffice that demand, I want to run away from the transaction, turn my back on the deal, avoid the covenant.

Perhaps I have been changed by my professional experience of being with so many dying people, or by living in a world where pointless violent death has become our daily bread in each

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news cycle; in any case, I am spent, and void of the compassion required to lay on the suffering of my Lord. I totally get Peter, who on the surface might have been reflexively trying to save his own skin by denying he knew Jesus, but who on a deeper level might not have been able to take in that something so horrible was happening to someone he loved; he could likely barely keep himself from full-out running away from the terror and the helplessness of it. Denial is a defense mechanism of survival that is embedded in the human psyche—and it employs itself when we are in danger—accompanying the sweat and the fast-beating heart. Sometimes it is all we have, when what we face is just too much to bear.

I will share with you what has helped me through this impasse with Good Friday and its emotional burden, and maybe there will be something in it for you. There is a story told by Philip Newell, former warden of Iona Abbey in Scotland, about a woman who inherited a cross necklace from her mother, and did not know what to do with it. She knew it was a precious gift, and yet what she had been taught about the cross all her life made it a confusing symbol for her. The cross of Christ as a symbol of substituted atonement—of God having to suffer and die a horrible death for sins she committed—did not resonate with her life and experience. And so she put the cross under a floorboard for safekeeping.

I find tenderness and empathy for the woman in the story, because the cross is a hard thing to comprehend for all of us to whom God has given the gift of salvation. It is hard to accept responsibility for Jesus having to pay for something that we—representing humanity—have done to break God’s heart. For what could we possibly do to make up for the cross? The impossibility of measuring up with enough goodness to overcome that amount of badness is overwhelming, so we hide our shame under the nearest floorboards—out of sight, out of mind.

Our way out of this conundrum is the way of grace. Grace is the gift upon gift from God which fills us with the courage not to run from the suffering of Jesus—but to see through the pain of it to God’s heart, which is full of love. The love of God is not subject to transaction, to re-payment, or to atonement. The cross reveals God’s first and deepest impulse manifest in our very creation—that God is self-giving. The whole of creation is an ongoing offering of God’s self; God’s heart beats with a pulsing love in the life of all things, even us. The cross is the

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revelation of the true nature of God, in whose image we are made, and that means it is also a symbol of our true nature—to be self-giving. We find our truest, deepest selves when we love one another, and forgive one another—deep from the heart and with the whole of our being—without regard to the cost and without waiting for something in return. That is what Jesus did, and that is what Jesus taught—to go and do likewise.

So the cross is not so much a payment to God for a debt we incurred, but more of a disclosure of God. Not a purchasing of love, but its manifestation. In the abounding and steadfast love of God and through the miracle of creation, we know that in the midst of death lie the seeds of new birth, new life, new gift, new resurrection. All that we are asked is to be open, to receive God’s gifts of love and forgiveness, and to love and forgive others. And in retrieving our self-giving nature we can retrieve our crosses from under the floorboards of our hearts.

AMEN

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