

Suffering Love
Passion Sunday
Luke 19:29-40; 22:1-6, 39; 23: 23:5, 13-56
Preached by Rev. Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, March 28, 2010

In his lecture entitled "Love, Pain and Suffering" C.S. Lewis said, "I'm going to say something that may come as a bit of a shock. I think that God doesn't necessarily want us to be happy. He wants us to be loveable. Worthy of love. Able to be loved by him...God creates us free to be selfish, but he adds a mechanism that penetrates our selfishness and wakes us up to the presence of others in the world, and that mechanism is called suffering... To put it another way, pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Let's paraphrase what Lewis was saying. The pursuit of happiness is not as important, in God's eyes, as being able to love and be loved. Perhaps the absence of happiness, and the reality of suffering, is God's way of grabbing our attention and redirecting our energies away from self-interest to becoming interested in the suffering of others and then willfully entering into it.

Lewis' observations are key to appreciating the enormous impact Holy Week and especially Good Friday has on the world God so loves.

During Holy Week Christians are encouraged to remember the key events in Christ's last hours, beginning with his triumphant march into Jerusalem, his last meal with his disciples, his betrayal with a kiss, his arrest and trial and finally his suffering and death on the cross.

But it's not enough to document these happenings, we must also enter Christ's suffering. Remember what Lewis said, God "adds a mechanism that penetrates our selfishness and wake us up to the presence of others in the world and that mechanism is called suffering."

The cross is God's megaphone. Christ's suffering was not just an historical event, but a cosmic event with eternal implications. It's not enough to remember he died for our sins, it's essential we enter into the mystery of his passion, not necessarily to understand it, but to experience it.

Here's something to consider: Who wants a doctor with zero bedside manner? The surgeon may well be the best and tops in his field. But if he can't connect with his patients, on the deepest emotional levels, if he's aloof, uncaring and unwilling to enter into his patient's suffering, isn't the main ingredient for healing and wellness missing? Likewise, who wants a teacher or professor who

loves his subject matter but doesn't love his students enough to come out from behind his lectern to not only share his knowledge but also his humanity?

Christ's suffering is God's way of telling us he's not like that! God comes down from the heavens and from behind the curtain to make us loveable. Worthy of love. Able to love and be loved even when we're not happy, even when we're suffering.

Of course, not even the brightest and best philosophers and prophets have ever solved the mystery of suffering. Why does God allow it? Why does God permit terrible things to happen to innocent people? How can anyone claim God is good when he doesn't stop our pain and suffering?

On this matter God is silent, but not absent, because Good Friday reveals God entering into our suffering and taking it onto himself. Maybe God doesn't tell us why he allows suffering and maybe he doesn't stop it, but he embraces it.

This may leave you cold. You may be thinking, "If God chooses to suffer, fine, just take away my and my loved ones' suffering, then I'll be satisfied." But still there's the question, "Then how can God, in Lewis' words, 'penetrate our selfishness and wake us up to the presence of others in the world' if we never experience suffering?"

The Gospels tell us on Good Friday Jesus really suffered. He wasn't play acting, just going through the motions. Remember besides being fully divine, Jesus was also fully human, like us in every way except not being a sinner, which probably made his suffering for our sins even more intense and terrible.

What and how then, did Jesus suffer?

I'm not sure anyone could ever really answer that question, but we can speculate.

First, his physical suffering. I often wondered if any of us were put through the same degree of torture Jesus faced if our pain would equal his. Certainly Hollywood has tried many times to portray the intensity of his torment. Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* presented Christ's torture so graphically it moved some to tears but also greatly offended others.

Even so, despite his best efforts, I think Gibson ultimately failed because Christ's deepest suffering could never be caught on film. For the first time ever Jesus and his Father were separated by all the sins that ever were and ever would be committed, not just our everyday, run of the mill sins but murders, sexual abuse, war crimes, the rich and powerful oppressing even enslaving the poor and weak, all the most heinous crimes and sins you could name and be repulsed by. Jesus, the innocent man, bore all those sins in his heart and soul and suffered for it beyond our imaginations.

On the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, one of the illustrations Michelangelo painted was of the damned being welcomed into hell. The look on the face of one man stands out and is particularly haunting. He's covering one eye because he can't bear to see where he's just landed. His face shows fear and shock, horror and despair.

Then there's another portrait, this one of the crucified Christ in the depths of his suffering by the Dutch artist Rien Poortvliet. Oddly enough the face of Christ reveals the exact same tortured emotions as that man in hell, shock and horror, fear and despair. Christ's was the suffering of the damned.

It's that brand of suffering Christ endured so we'd never have to, and yet on Good Friday the climax of Holy Week, we're invited into Christ's suffering, again not to understand it but to experience it, as God allows us, in order to penetrate our selfishness and wake us up to the presence of others in God's world.

That's why the Apostle Paul encouraged the Philippians "...make my joy complete: be of the same mind having the same love, being in full accord... Do nothing from selfish ambition... but in humility regard others as better than yourself. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who...emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."
(Philippians 2:2-8)

When, by the grace of God, you enter the mind of Christ, and realize his motivation to suffer for the sins of the world, your sins included, then you can begin to comprehend Christ suffered greatly because Christ loves unconditionally, which leads me to believe, in some horribly awesome way, that love and suffering are mysteriously intertwined, cut from the same cloth, two pieces of the whole. You can't have love without suffering, you can't endure suffering without love.

"Why does God allow suffering?" Only Good Friday makes any sense of it because when we look at that man stretched out and placarded on his cross, suffering and dying because he loves us, only then can suffering find its purpose. We can love only because we suffer, not just for ourselves, but one another.

On Passion Sunday, after orchestrating his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, knowing full well it would all end in tragedy, Christ started something that couldn't be stopped, God's plan to win our salvation. Jesus knew full well this victory would cost him everything, but he plowed ahead anyway because he was motivated by the greatest power in the universe, the pure and unconditional love he received from his Father, he was compelled to pass on us.

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As we follow Jesus through the gates of Jerusalem to the Temple, then the Upper Room and finally the cross, may God bless us all with a growing awareness of the power of redemptive suffering which makes love possible.