

“Sacrificial Love”

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UCC at The Villages
April 17, 3011

Psalm 22

John 19:17-30

“... carrying the cross by himself, [Jesus] went out to what is called
The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha.
There they crucified him...”

John 19:17-18

Let us pray... O God,

How is it that the Son of God was so badly treated by humankind?

How is it that people often treat each other as badly if not worse?

Help us to understand so we can put an end to our own participation
in that vicious cycle.

Amen

On Palm Sunday, we remember Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem
which we re-enact like many churches do with a choral procession,
waving palm leaves.

Orthodox Christian churches actually do such a procession every Sunday,
when the Communion elements are carried through the sanctuary
by the priest who follows acolytes carrying the cross, candles,
and ceremonial fans.

In seminary, we were taught that such a procession is a form of sacred movement,
otherwise called ‘liturgical dance’.

So, we all did some liturgical dancing this morning!

And this is to help us imagine what it was like to be in that crowd with Jesus,
joyfully waving palm fronds and shouting, ‘Hosanna!’ and ‘Hallelujah!’

Now, this crowd was most likely people already following Jesus
since he left Jericho – and not necessarily people from Jerusalem.

That works better for me than the assumption that this would be the same crowd
that turned against Jesus later in the week – though that could’ve been so.

But let’s give that Palm Sunday crowd the benefit of the doubt
and hope that’s the group we would find ourselves in!

The Triumphal Entry of Christ into Jerusalem is the culmination of events
set into motion by the death of John the Baptist.

With the news that John had been executed on the whim of Herod the Potentate,
Jesus immediately went away to go into solitude.

But a multitude of people heard about this and followed after him
to a desolate place on the far shores of Galilee.

And there Jesus healed those who were sick and fed more than 5,000 of them
before he finally had a chance to pray.

Willard, p.2

Then he did something remarkable –

he caught up to his disciples who left earlier in the boat
by walking on the water!

Whether or not it literally happened – we have to ask the question,
“Why? What does it mean?”

The next day, many people of that crowd would get into boats and follow after him,
looking for another free meal,

but he would discourage them by saying
his body would be offered up as ‘bread from heaven’.

The whole mission depended on whether the disciples

had at least some understanding of what Jesus was about to go through.

And it was at this point that another remarkable event took place –

he was transfigured – or metamorphosized, on the mountaintop
demonstrating the nature of his true self to his closest disciples.

After this, it says in Luke 9:51 with words to this effect,

“The time had come for him to be taken up into heaven,
so he set his face to go to Jerusalem –

he was determined to confront his destiny in Jerusalem.”

So, that’s where we are in the story of Christ

when he enters the city gates riding on a donkey
surrounded by a cheering multitude.

This Sunday is also called Passion Sunday referring to Christ’s passion –
Christ’s love for us, as demonstrated by the sufferings he endured
even to death.

Usually, we go from Palm Sunday to the solemn service of Maundy Thursday
about Jesus’ last supper with his disciples
and the events of his arrest and trial.

Then, the next time we get together, it’s Easter Sunday already
when we celebrate Christ’s Resurrection!

So, it has been rare for me to preach about the Crucifixion itself and ask,
“Why was it necessary for Jesus Christ the Son of God to die
in such a brutal way?”

At our Living the Questions Bible Study last week,
there was a lively discussion on the topic of the atonement.

A medieval theologian named Anselm developed the ‘satisfaction’ theory
such that a perfect God could not be reconciled with a sinful
humanity unless a retribution was paid.

God so loved the world – according to this doctrine, that God’s Son was sacrificed
to die as the substitute for humanity to pay the debt of original sin.

Willard, p.3

An earlier theory of atonement – called “Christus Victor”,
was that a ransom had to be paid by Christ, dying as humanity’s substitute
to liberate us from domination by the devil.

However, the devil was tricked because Christ could not be killed and stay dead,
thus defeating oppression and death itself.

Modern Jesus scholars prefer this model, correlating institutional evils –
originally, the Roman Empire and its Herodian collaborators,
as the structures of dominance that Christ ultimately conquers.

The third – and oldest atonement theory was the “moral influence”
of Christ’s teachings and faithful example –
including his death on the cross, but not limited to that.

It could be said that Christ didn’t simply die for our sins,
but rather died *because* of them.

The previous theories take a position that God won’t forgive misdeeds
without some form of punishment.

In the moral influence view, God values the present and future of a person
who has achieved an inward repentance and so, God disregards past sins.
We are saved by our love.

What works for you as an explanation? Where is the Good News for you?

Do you see Christ dying on the cross as your substitute,
taking the punishment for your sins to clear your record,
or paying for your ransom to get out of a system of domination,
or setting an example for your moral behavior
that implies God’s forgiveness and your commitment?

These are some of those ‘questions’ that require our ‘living’ to answer.

Images of the Crucifixion can serve an important role in that process –
and I believe the most important is that of creating empathy.

When we hear a story, it could be about a rickshaw driver in Calcutta
or a Madison Avenue executive or some other person
in another time and place and immediately we can put ourselves
in that person’s shoes – or sandals,
because that is the nature of storytelling and parables.

As modern people we have the benefit of movies as storytelling
and one of the greatest examples of portraying Christ on film
will be shown here next Tuesday night - and it is called “Parable”.

I won’t say much more about it than to say that it portrays
Christ’s life as a parable for our lives.

Willard, p.4

One of the most powerful images of Christ in classic art is
the Crucifixion by Matias Grunewald in his Isenheim altarpiece.
Grunewald painted this for the St Anthony Monastery at Isenheim,
group of monks who served as a hospital, specialized in treatment
for people who had a disfiguring skin disease called ergotism.

And this artist portrayed Christ on the cross in agony
with scars all over him from the whipping he endured –
which could also be interpreted to be like the skin disease
that the people of Isenheim would recognize.

The portrayal of the Crucifixion in this case provides an example
of how Jesus' suffering on the Cross can be seen as a reflection of our own.

We each have our own cross to bear and
that is not something we can easily do alone.
In today's bulletin, please find an insert that has –
on one side,
a picture of Christ's face as he was on the cross;
and on the other side,
the outline of a cross – for you to acknowledge what causes you suffering.

The Cross of Christ is meant to arouse our recognition and our indignation'
When we recognize someone else's pain as being like our own,
it is the beginning of empathy – of love even,
and the building block of that Beloved Community
that is possible between people.

And it took the example of the Son of God to help us make that connection.

Amen

Psalm 22

Our lesson from the Jewish Testament today comes from the 22nd Psalm.

It begins with a lament –familiar to us as Jesus’ cry from the cross.

*Listen for how the psalm changes from vivid images of persecution
to a future of peace in the heavenly assembly...*

1 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

2 O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

3 Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.

4 In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.

5 To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

6 But I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and despised by the people.

7 All who see me mock at me;
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;

8 ‘Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver—
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!’

9 Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.

10 On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

11 Do not be far from me, for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.

12 Many bulls encircle me,
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;

13 they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.

14 I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast;

15 my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.

16 For dogs are all around me;
a company of evildoers encircles me.
My hands and feet have shrivelled;
17 I can count all my bones.
They stare and gloat over me;
18 they divide my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.

19 But you, O Lord, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
20 Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life from the power of the dog!
21 Save me from the mouth of the lion!

From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.
22 I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
23 You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
24 For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.

25 From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
26 The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
May your hearts live for ever!

27 All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord;
and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.
28 For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations.

29 To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him.
30 Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,
31 and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.

John 19:17-37

17and carrying the cross by himself, [Jesus] went out to what is called
The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha.

18There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side,
with Jesus between them.

19Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross.

It read, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.'

20Many of the [Judeans] read this inscription,

because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city;

and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek.

21Then the chief priests of the [Jewish people] said to Pilate,

'Do not write, "The King of the Jews",

but, "This man said, I am King of the Jews."'

22Pilate answered,

'What I have written I have written.'

23When the soldiers had crucified Jesus,

they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier.

They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless,

woven in one piece from the top.

24So they said to one another,

'Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it.'

This was to fulfil what the scripture says,

'They divided my clothes among themselves,

and for my clothing they cast lots.'

25And that is what the soldiers did.

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother,

and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

26When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved

standing beside her, he said to his mother,

'Woman, here is your son.'

27Then he said to the disciple,

'Here is your mother.'

And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

28 After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished,

he said (in order to fulfil the scripture),

'I am thirsty.'

29A jar full of sour wine was standing there.

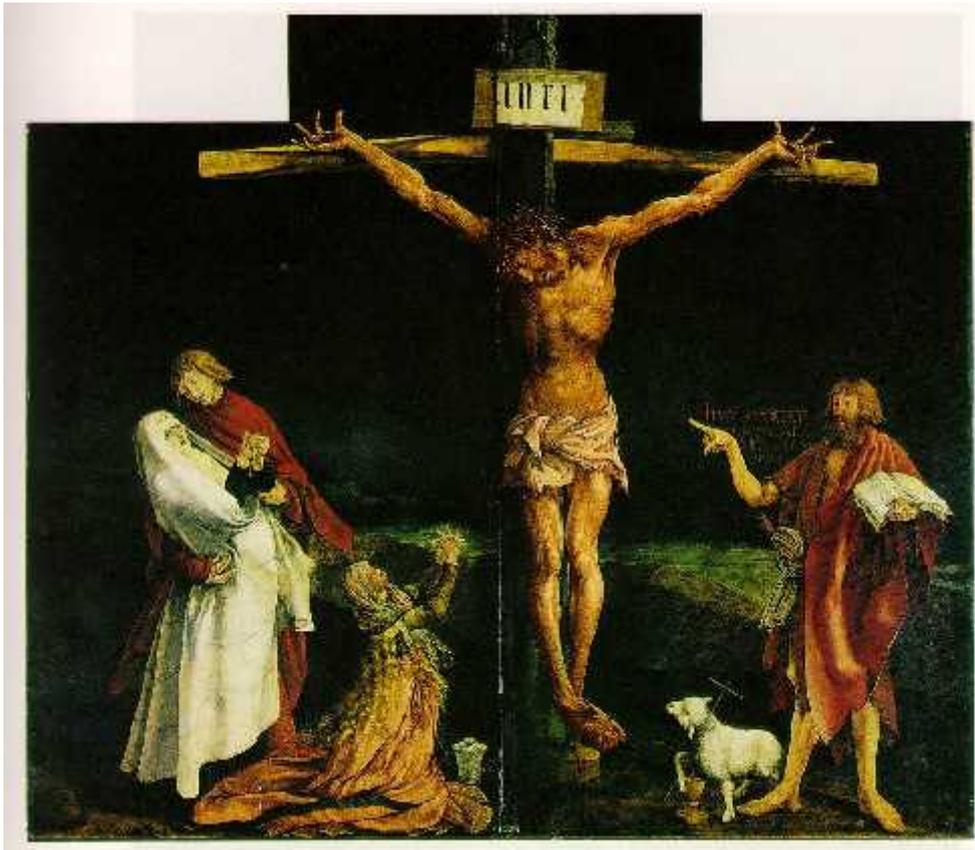
So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop

and held it to his mouth.

30When Jesus had received the wine, he said,

'It is finished.'

Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.



By far [Grunewald's] greatest, as well as his largest work, it was painted for the Monastery of St. Anthony in Isenheim near Colmar, [France] which specialized in hospital work. The Antonine monks of the monastery were noted for their treatment of sufferers of skin disease, such as ergotism, symptoms of which are displayed by figures including the crucified Christ in the altarpiece.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isenheim_Altarpiece