

Good Friday

March 30, 2018

St. John's Cathedral

I saw a man out of the corner of my eye as a friend and I drove north on the highway near Lincoln City, Oregon, a few years ago. A lot of people walk along this highway, but this man was different. He was carrying a cross. All by himself. No entourage. No sign. Just a man laboring under a big, wooden cross, trudging along this ocean side highway.

I only saw him for a split second, but I've thought about him ever since. Who was he? Where was he going? Why was he carrying that cross?

Sometimes it seems startling to see the cross out of context like that. (If there is there such a thing as the cross being out of context.) We're accustomed to seeing the cross in church. On churches. On church-related things like newsletters and signs. We're accustomed to seeing Christians wear a cross – a necklace or a pin as both jewelry and as a sign of faith. We label ourselves this way. And all of those things seem pretty safe – pretty normal.

But to lug a cross through a public place. Well, that's a little different. But powerful.

Today we come together to gaze upon the cross. That's why we're here. It is Good Friday. It's the day we remember Jesus' death on the cross. A day of great sadness and sorrow. This Lenten journey has been a journey to the cross and today we are here.

And we have again heard (and participated in ) the familiar story of Jesus' betrayal and crucifixion. Of a trial that seems pretty unjust. Of Jesus' friends deserting him. Of mockery

and humiliation. Of pain and agony. This is a tough story. A story whose pain is tempting to shy away from.

Pain is hard for us. And what makes us want to turn away is that at some level, we've known pain ourselves. In our own little worlds we have been betrayed or have betrayed others. We've had friends walk away. We have struggled with grief. We have felt abandoned. We have faced into huge questions that do not seem to have clear answers.

God knows that the history of humanity is filled with many kinds of pain. We don't have to look very hard or to look very far. The agony of war; people displaced from their homes; frightened; tortured and punished; People sleeping on the streets of our cities and under bridges. Children living in danger. People dealing with serious illness. Hunger. Addiction. Physical challenge. This is part of the human experience and so complicated. It is our reality as less than perfect human beings who live less than perfect lives in a less than perfect world.

All of that is part of the Good Friday mix. And it comes together for us as we face the cross. As we come to understand the message of this day: that in Jesus' suffering on the cross, he gathers into himself and takes into his heart all of our suffering. All of the suffering that the world knows. The cross becomes our symbol for this incomprehensible love of Jesus for us and for the broken world that we live in.

We have an opportunity to venerate the cross today – we express our reverence for it in some way by touching it or coming forward to stand near it in silence or lighting a candle. Our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters do this so well and so gracefully. Sometimes these

gestures feel a little awkward for Episcopalians who tend to be reserved. We have to stretch just a bit to do this.

For many years I was part of a group that offered prayer in the style of the Taizé community of France here at the Cathedral and St. St. Anne's Catholic Church. – It was a quiet evening of chants and scripture readings and candlelight that was extraordinary. Almost every time we gathered we did what is called the “prayer around the cross” that was one of the most powerful parts of the service

We placed a large, wooden cross on the floor and surrounded it with candles. There was a time when anyone could come forward to kneel there– or to touch the cross. Sometimes people would kneel on the floor and lean forward touch their head to the cross – a gesture of surrendering to Jesus all of the pain of their lives and the life of the world – all of the questions – all of the perplexities – and letting them be taken up into his suffering. We're not used to that kind of surrender – especially when we work so hard to control everything in our lives and surroundings.

But that is Jesus' invitation to us from the cross.

There is an odd mixture on Good Friday of the personal and the public. Each of us brings to this worship something personal and private. But there is also that wider gesture of Good Friday that reaches out to the whole world.

About 25 years ago I was part of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and experienced what most Holy Land pilgrims do at some point – a walk along the Via Dolorosa in the old city of

Jerusalem – Jesus’ walk to the cross. When we do this in church, we call it “stations of the cross,” as we prayerfully remember some of the key events and places of that journey. Earlier today some of our congregation participated in the same devotion downtown, stopping to pray at several agencies that help the homeless, the disenfranchised, the lonely, those that are hungry on many levels.

I’m not sure what I was expecting in Jerusalem – probably something very quiet and pious with space to contemplate the power of each of these stations.

What I forgot was this was happening in the middle of a real city. So there we were – dodging traffic, wandering through fruit and vegetable stands, trying to hear the prayers over the din of a street vendor with rock music blaring from his boom box.

It was unsettling at first. But then the “aha.” Jesus wasn’t on retreat as he made that last, agonizing journey to the cross. He made that journey in a real city crowded with religious pilgrims – in the push and pull of life, in the midst of political pressure, in the noisy, messy reality of daily life.

Sure, Good Friday has its personal tug on each of our hearts. It should. But it has its bigger context, too. Its wider reach to our whole world.

Maybe that’s what the guy carrying his cross down the Pacific Coast Highway is doing – reminding us of Jesus’ love for everyone – those loved easily and those loved not so easily. Reminding us of his broad reach that gathers all of us into his arms.

Today we stand before the cross and take in all of its sadness, all of its suffering. And as we do this, we know that the story doesn't end here, but continues as today's heartache is transformed into salvation.

A familiar prayer from our prayer book – one we often pray on Fridays -- frames this Good Friday for me:

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that all might come within the reach of your saving embrace: so clothe us in your spirit that we, reaching our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you for the sake of your name.

May we be caught up in that loving embrace and then reach out in love to share it.