

Holy Cross Day (observed)
Synod Worship Service
September 13, 2020
1 Corinthians 1.18-24 & John 3.13-17

Beloved, all: grace, mercy and peace be yours and mine from God and our savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

This last Wednesday, through the magic of Zoom, I was with the pericope Bible Study group that I've belonged to for over 20 years. We gather each week to study scripture together and prepare for our Sunday sermons. Though the group was studying another text assigned for this Sunday, I was planning to preach on the festival of the Holy Cross, traditionally observed tomorrow, September 14, since I am preaching for a celebration of Holy Cross Day in the context of installing a new pastor at St. Paul in Cumberland, later this afternoon.

While I love Christmas and Easter, a red-letter day like Holy Cross gives us pause to meet Christ anew apart from the hustle, bustle and details, to see in our celebration the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus without all the logistics that we steward in our many Holy Week services. Holy Cross Day invites us to contemplate what the cross means in our own lives; perhaps even calling to mind the crosses that you and I bear, the crucifixions we witness in the suffering of others, or even in ourselves.

While God's presence can often be deeply felt in the midst of challenging experiences; significant experiences of suffering have a way of narrowing our vision, reminding us how many things in life that we have spent ourselves on become more superficial or insignificant in the face of mortality. The mundane distractions of daily life fade away, and we are left with what really matters: our relationship with God and with those around us. The experience of illness or profound loss can take away so much; still, sometimes in those crucible moments of our lives we see the love of God more fully and feel it most deeply in our own hearts. It is paradox and it is truth, and at the center of paradox and truth stands the cross. The cross shows us the depth of God's love for us. God loves us so very deeply that God pours out God's self-giving love, even unto death. That pattern is reflected in the whole of Jesus' ministry, not only at the cross, and the ultimate victory of the resurrection; but embodied in the example and witness of Christ in relationship to those on the margins, those who live outside the mainstream, the world-forsaken nameless-faceless siblings who are the collateral damage of culture, tradition and sin.

It's why, when someone does in fact, embody that greater love, being willing to lay down one's life for others, we are struck to the marrow. The long rows of marble stones that mark the graves of those who gave their lives at places like Antietam, Gettysburg, Normandy, Iwo Jima, in Korea, Vietnam, Libya and the Persian Gulf to name a few, never ceases to choke me up. The brave police, firefighters and EMS workers who ran towards the towers on fire and the smoldering ruins at the Pentagon on 9-11 continue to humble and inspire. Those who spend themselves trying to contain uncontrollable wildfires in the west; those who put themselves in harms way to offer comfort and support to those who know loss in the midst of natural disasters, gun violence and pandemic; the cross gives us a lens with which we see these, and the masked doctors, nurses, techs, teachers, grocery clerks and delivery drivers with new eyes, deep respect and more compassionate hearts.

That does not mean that suffering is a good in and of itself or that it should be sought out. Sadly, there is a legacy of the Church saying to those on the margins or those who are oppressed that they should accept their current reality as their “cross to bear” and to find consolation in the fact that suffering brings us closer to God. Hear this truth: God does not will us to experience pain or suffering; the scriptures give credible and consistent witness that Jesus came so that we might have life, and have it abundantly, now and in the life to come.

South American feminist theologian Ivone Gebara, a member of a Roman Catholic religious community, is deeply critical of the Church for the ways in which it has used the cross to perpetuate suffering for those on the margins of society. She helps us to look at the reality of suffering with an important critical lens. When we encounter suffering in our lives, our own or others, we must ask an essential question: is this suffering endemic to the human experience (such as illness or a natural disaster) or is this suffering the result of injustice? If it is endemic, then we must learn to live with it, and it is here that we can be grateful for God’s presence to us in the midst of suffering, even as we seek to be the comfort of Christ with our care for the suffering. If, on the other hand, the suffering we have encountered is the result of injustice then we followers of Jesus are called to name those injustices and combat them. When our siblings suffer, and *they are* suffering, the cross reminds us of our baptismal call to speak out and sacrifice something of ourselves to bring about change, to broker real hope for today, not pie in the sky illusory hope for tomorrow.

At one point in our Bible Study, the conversation turned to atonement, that is, what was required and accomplished at the cross? I cautioned my colleagues to be careful about wading into such a quagmire, a conversation that I’ve seen stump seminarians in front of candidacy committees, and turned theologian against theologian. Martin Luther posits that the cross is where we learn who God is and how God saves. We don’t worship the cruel instrument of death, that is the cross; we worship the Christ, who in love stretched out his hands on the cross. We don’t glorify the suffering of the cross, we recognize the heart of God revealed there in Jesus Christ. To put it plainly, one cannot have “for God so loved the world that God gave the only begotten son,” without the often overlooked verse that follows it – and is inextricably tied to it – “for God did not send the son into the world to condemn, but that the world should be saved through him.” God’s purpose is not death, God is always for life. God is not conspiring to condemn, God spends Godself on redemption. The cross stands as witness to life and redemption, not suffering and condemnation. That’s what makes the cross a sign of hope.

Beloved, since we have irrepressible hope in Christ, the cross ceases to be stumbling block or foolishness for some, but comfort and inspiration for all. Here, we can find comfort, particularly any of us who may in the midst of our own trials and tribulations, in the profound truth that God knows our suffering and God is present with us even in our most vulnerable moments. Here, we are inspired, particularly those of us who are in positions of power and privilege, to continue the fight against injustice; to stand with those on the margins, and to recognize that if we have any particular cross to bear in this life, it is the hard and holy work of realizing God’s dream of justice and life abundant for all people, now.

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