

Good Friday, Year A
John 18:1-19:37

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The Weight of the Cross

What gives the Stations of the Cross and the dramatic reading of the Passion Narrative such power is that they each force us to meditate upon the brutal reality of Jesus Christ's journey to the Cross. The Stations of the Cross are brutal as they take us through the events of the *Via Dolorosa*, the painful road, which Jesus walked step by step, the full weight of the cross on his shoulders as his burden to bear for us. We cannot hide behind euphemisms. We cannot claim any room for gentle descriptions of what took place that day. The Passion Narrative takes our breath as we feel the weight of the cross fall upon us as we shout, "crucify him!" with the crowd. We are all condemned by it.

As I thought about that process of moving from station to station and experiencing each step of the Passion anew, I remembered an event I once participated in when I was in the Navy. Many of the families in our squadron lived on base or in the neighborhoods close by. We had what was called a "progressive dinner." The party would begin at one home where the couple had prepared appetizers. After an hour the party would move to the next home on the circuit and have the next course, a salad. Then we all moved on to the next home, where we'd have the main course, and then on to the next home for dessert. In many ways, the service of Stations of the Cross is like a progressive dinner. We move as a group from one place to the next – except we are feasting on the very gritty realities of the witness of the cross. It is a feast of which we cannot skip the hors d'oeuvres, the entree, the dessert. This feast doesn't care if you are lactose intolerant, gluten-free, or vegan. This feast pushes you to partake of each detail. You will taste each offering – you cannot leave the table before the meal is over. I am reminded of when Paul wrote in his First Letter to the Corinthians: "I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready (3.2)..." Paul was speaking of the spiritual immaturity of the community of new believers in Corinth. If that community could only handle milk, the Stations of Cross and the reading of the Passion Narrative I think would then be akin to meat and high fiber in our spiritual diet. It is tough stuff.

Perhaps that is what precisely keeps some people from coming to the Stations of the Cross services – they cannot handle the details of Jesus' suffering or they cannot stomach this bitter spiritual food we eat at each station. But we return to this moment every year on Good Friday. The invitation repeated every year from the earliest records of Christian worship to re-enact, re-experience, and re-witness the Passion of our Lord.

Why is it so important to mark this day? As Christians, we are an "Easter People," who find our hope in the Resurrection. But we return each year to this day, Good Friday. It is set aside and we mark the day with remembrance of Jesus' suffering and sacrifice and the witness of those who were there. I will propose to you that this memory of the long, painful walk with Jesus to the place of the skull, the way we mark the moment he is nailed to the cross, mocked and pierced, the way we feel the weight of his body in his mother's arms, and that we go with Joseph to lay his body in the tomb is *Crucial* to the Christian faith.

Crucial is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as

a : important or essential as resolving a crisis : decisive

b : marked by final determination of a doubtful issue <the crucial game of a series>

c : important, significant

synonyms: critical, key, pivotal, vital

It is *crucial* that we be witnesses. In the opening collect for the Stations of the Cross we pray, "Assist us mercifully with your help, O Lord God of our salvation, that we may enter with joy upon the contemplation of those mighty acts, whereby you have given us life and immortality..." and we do enter into the experience.

Through the repetition of this liturgy each year we become witnesses to the full humanity of Christ. This is a point that you think is settled. The early church struggled with heresies that claimed Jesus to be many things other than fully human and fully divine. As people converted to Christianity, they grappled with this new theology in terms they understood about divinity and through the lens of their former religions. Was Jesus half god, half man like Hercules? Was he a purely spiritual being who by illusion looked human during his time on earth? At the Council of Nicaea in 325AD St.

Athanasius represented what became orthodoxy – the fight for the full humanity of Jesus and the full divinity held in tension. Some Christian traditions have been unable to hold this mystery together, have fallen away from Jesus in his full humanity. By re-telling the story of Christ’s suffering we reaffirm the burden he carried for us with arms bruised, with his back shredded by whips, legs that struggled and gave way three times as he fell beneath the weight.

We are witnesses to the absolute death of Jesus: It is the wake we hold each year. Those who were present recount their stories through tradition and scripture; they invite us into the moments that they experienced on the way to the cross and beyond. The details of Jesus’ final moments of agony and “perfect obedience unto death” are a gift to us – a terrible gift, a price paid so that we might have life abundantly. We must witness the absolute death of Jesus so that we can affirm the resurrection and celebrate the gift. In the Passion Narrative in St. John’s Gospel, which we read today, we feel this urgency to testify to this death. St. John includes the detail about the soldier who pierced Jesus’ side to make doubly sure that what their eyes beheld, a dead body on the cross, was in fact dead. John writes that the scripture was fulfilled, “They will look on the one whom they pierced.”

My mind’s eye always takes me from the Thirteenth Station as Jesus’ mother receives his body into her arms to the powerful image of Michelangelo’s sculpture La Pietà, the weight of Jesus’ body lying across Mary’s lap captured in marble. The devastation of his body is complete and her soul is in tumult. Jesus was utterly and uncompromisingly dead.

We are witnesses to the complete abandonment of Christ. Judas, one of the twelve disciples, whom Jesus loved, abandoned Jesus first. Disgusted by Jesus’ actions as he assumed the humiliating posture of a servant and washed his disciples’ feet, Judas walked out into the night. Judas returned with a betraying kiss, to hand over Jesus to trial and execution. Peter denied knowing Jesus to save himself from the association, the taint of being a disciple of the one on trial. We stand together and shout, “Crucify him!” Crucify him!” We stand along with the crowds who had a few days before hailed him as a king and sang Hosanna! as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a colt. We feel the weight of our own complicity in Jesus’ death.

Then in order to complete it, in order to take on the final task of carrying the weight of the sins of the world, the sin which separated humanity from God, Jesus had to take upon himself the fullness of that separation before he died. We witness the weight of that burden which caused him to cry out, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Mark 15.34) That is the moment when Jesus was utterly alone, abandoned and forsaken. We witness it and let the power of that separation bring us to our knees as Jesus died.

We recount, re-experience these moments together with the witness of the Gospels and tradition because it is *crucial* to our ability to say without a doubt that Christ suffered in his full humanity his death and separation from God as he bore the weight of all our sins – past, present, and future, so that we might have full access to the Father and to forgiveness in the resurrection.

There is another piece to our understanding of Good Friday that I think is *crucial*.

The word *crucial* had an earlier meaning which had to do with arriving at a crossroads and encountering the sign post, and the criss-cross of “this way to” planks which pointed to the direction in which you were to turn. At the point where Jesus came to the cross, the direction for the journey of all of humanity was once and forever changed. Where does the cross point us in our faith? If the cross marks a point in your life at a crossroads, which way will you choose? Where will this journey we remember today, of a man beaten and broken dragging a cross through the streets of Jerusalem, take you? Where will Jesus’ journey into death on your behalf take you?

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that the Lord called Israel to “put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.” The actions of Jesus on our behalf, his sacrifice for us on the cross, bring us even closer to the Lord our God. We can choose to follow Jesus, to follow him on the road to which the cross points us.

Our hearts are imprinted with the memory of suffering and sacrifice that Jesus made on our behalf. In our mind’s eye, our path is bathed in the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was “willing to be betrayed, and given into the hands of sinners, and to suffer death upon the cross” for our sake.

This day in which we celebrate and mark the weight of the cross is *crucial*. Amen.