

GOOD FRIDAY – March 25, 2016

John 18:1-19:42

The Rev. Carenda Baker

GOOD FRIDAY. I have been curious about the derivation of that name for this day. The Greek Church referred to this as Holy Friday or Great Friday. In the 6th or 7th century the Roman Church began to refer to the Friday before Easter as “Good Friday”. It’s so counter-intuitive isn’t it, calling today “Good”. It’s a legitimate question for all of us to ask – believers, questioners, skeptics, those with no faith and those of other faith traditions. What do we as Christians mean in calling this holy Friday “Good”?

Of all the gospel writers, John would be the one to give his most hearty stamp of approval to calling this day, “Good Friday”. I love that the Holy Scriptures provide us four diverse accounts of Jesus’ crucifixion. It’s sort of like a kaleidoscope when you turn the lens and you get to see things from a very different and unique angle, a different perspective.

Always on Good Friday John’s version of the Passion gospel is read. There is unmistakably a sense of divine power in John’s account. Jesus is presented as fully knowing and in charge of how events unfold. John writes a lot about Jesus being glorified – meaning lifted up on the cross to complete God’s plan of saving the whole world from death and destruction, saving it from itself. Absent from John’s gospel is Jesus struggling with doing God’s will as he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, as in the other gospels. When his enemies come looking for him, Jesus says, “I AM HE, the one you’re looking for”. For John and his community, this harkens back to Moses meeting God at the burning bush and learning God’s name is “I AM WHO I AM”. Yep, says John, Jesus is the great I AM – Good Shepherd, Vine, Bread of Life, the Way, Truth, and Life. Jesus does not say in John’s gospel, “Let this cup pass from me”, but something more like – “Bring it on”, as he tells Peter his purpose is to drink this cup the Father has given him. In his meeting with Pilate, Jesus says, I am God’s ultimate truth standing right here in front of you. What do you want to do about that? John does not

paint a picture of Jesus as desolate and abandoned, crying out for God as is portrayed in Mark's gospel.

In John's gospel, Jesus is beaten down and bloodied, but even in death he is not powerless. John's Jesus is at the same time both victim and victor. From the opening of his gospel, John refers to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. For John, Jesus is the Passover lamb slaughtered, whose blood is given to protect and ensure the life of those whom God loves – the entire world. It's what we say every time we share the Eucharist - "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us, therefore let us keep the feast." In John's gospel, Jesus, the Divine Hero dies to finally win not just the battle, but the whole bloody war between God and those forces that oppose God in the forms of sin, evil, and death.

It has become common practice on Good Friday to attend services in which the Word proclaimed focuses on the Seven Last Words of Christ. (In fact, I will be preaching on the last of these 7 words a bit later this afternoon for the Chambersburg Community Good Friday service).

Three of those seven "last words" are recounted in John's gospel. They provide an unmistakable window into John's community of faith, and their perspective on the person and mission of Jesus. In these three last words of Jesus can be found "good news", even on this sad and holy Good Friday.

John's is the only account of the Passion in which the three women – all Mary's - stand near the cross (not at a distance), and where Jesus entrusts his mother and the beloved disciple into each other's care. ***"Woman, here is your son. [Son] Here is your mother."*** There is more going on here than Jesus just looking out for his mother and dear friend. Jesus is sowing seeds of the new community to come, in which family will not be restricted to blood kin, but family will be redefined as members called to be responsible for one another. There at the cross, in their moment of greatest grief as

they watch Jesus the son die, a new community is being birthed to provide them comfort, hope, support, and strength after Jesus dies, and is gone from their presence.

As the ordeal of his crucifixion progresses, Jesus says, "***I thirst.***" As is true throughout John's gospel, there is initially presented a specific physical need, but John drills down and offers a much deeper spiritual reality that rises to the surface. It is one of the reasons John's gospel is experienced as the most "mystical" of the gospels. There is always more, deeper and richer meaning as one comes to know and experience Jesus.

The late Mother Teresa of Calcutta wrote a beautiful reflection on this word of Jesus from the cross. She titled it: "I Thirst for You".

I THIRST FOR YOU
Mother Teresa

"I know you through and through – I know everything about you. The very hairs of your head I have numbered. Nothing in your life is unimportant to me, I have followed you through the years, and I have always loved you – even in your wanderings.

I know every one of your problems. I know your need and your worries. And yes, I know all your sins. But I tell you again that I love you – not for what you have or haven't done – I love you for you, for the beauty and dignity my Father gave you by creating you in his own image.

It is a dignity you have often forgotten, a beauty you have tarnished by sin. But I love you as you are, and I have shed my blood to win you back. If you only ask me with faith, my grace will touch all that needs changing in your life; and I will give you the strength to free yourself from sin and all its destructive power.

I know what is in your heart – I know your loneliness and all your hurts – the rejections, the judgments, the humiliations. I carried it all before you. And I carried it all for you, so you might share my strength and victory. I know especially your need for love – how you are thirsting to be loved and cherished. But how often have you thirsted in vain, by seeking that love selfishly, striving to fill the emptiness inside you with passing pleasures – with even greater emptiness of sin. Do you thirst for love? "Come to me all you who thirst" (John 7:37). I will satisfy you and fill you. Do you thirst to be cherished? I cherish you more than you can imagine to the point of dying on a cross for you.

I thirst for you. Yes, that is the only way to even begin to describe my love for you: *I thirst for you.* I thirst to love and be loved by you – that is how precious you are to me. *I thirst for you.* Come to me, and fill your heart and heal your wounds.

If you feel unimportant in the eyes of the world, that matters not at all. For me,

there is no one any more important in the entire world than you. *I thirst for you.* Open to me, come to me, thirst for me, give me your life – and I will prove to you how important you are to my heart.

No matter how far you may wander, no matter how often you forget me, no matter how many crosses you may bear in this life, there is one thing I want you to remember always, one thing that will never change: *I thirst for you* – just as you are. You don't need to change to believe in my love, for it will be your belief in my love that will change you. You forget me, and yet I am seeking you every moment of the day – standing at the door of your heart, and knocking.

Do you find this hard to believe? Then look at the cross, look at my heart that was pierced for you. Have you not understood my cross? Then listen again to the words I spoke there – for they tell you clearly why I endured all this for you: *I thirst.* (John 19:28). Yes, I thirst for you – as the rest of the Psalm verse which I was praying says of me: “I looked for love, and I found none” (Psalm 69:20).

All your life I have been looking for your love – I have never stopped seeking to love and be loved by you. You have tried many other things in your search for happiness; why not try opening your heart to me, right now, more than you ever have before.

Whenever you do open the door of your heart, whenever you come close enough, you will hear me say to you again and again, not in mere human words but in spirit: “No matter what you have done, I love you for your own sake.”

Come to me with your misery and your sins, with your trouble and needs, and with all your longing to be loved. I stand at the door of your heart and knock. Open to me, for *I thirst for you.* “

[Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter. The Plough Publishing House, 2003, p. 186-189.]

Jesus' final word from the cross in John's gospel is – ***“It is finished”***. Not “I am finished”, but “It is finished”, the work God gave him to do has been completed. The mission has been accomplished. The world's worst has met God's best in Jesus, the Crucified one on the cross. For John, the cross is not a failure that is overcome in the victory of the resurrection. This day can be called “Good” because even in the worst suffering, God is not only present, not only taking on the suffering and sharing the world's pain, God actively works to bring forth life, to bring GOOD. The power of God's desire and plan to love, redeem and restore the world will not be defeated by anything. No earthly or spiritual power can match God's.

This day of sad, hard won triumph is reflected in many of our hymns. Listen to the last two stanzas and refrain of "Lift High the Cross" (Hymn #473, *The Hymnal*1982):

"O Lord, once lifted on the glorious tree, as thou has promised, draw the world to thee. So shall our song of triumph ever be: praise to the Crucified for victory. Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim, till all the world adore his sacred Name."

The gospel writer John beckons us to recall again these three precious gifts we have received through Jesus' death. We have been made part of a new community, Christ's Body, which is drawn ever closer to Christ's heart, and given strength to live in love by sharing the Sacrament of his body and blood in the Eucharist. We have been gifted and blessed with the knowledge and the assurance that God's thirst to be with us and for us is far deeper than we can imagine, so much deeper than our thirst for God. And we are heirs of the truth, that the power of God's love cannot be defeated by sin, evil, or death. Which means we can face all circumstances in life and death without FEAR of anything! Nothing is going to snatch us away from the Good Shepherd's care. Nothing will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ. This then, is the Good News for us on this holy and good Friday. Amen.

