

The Church of the Holy Cross
Good Friday, 2013
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Holy Exposure

Hanging naked on the Cross, Jesus exposes the worst in human nature: our capacity to humiliate, inflict pain, degrade, dehumanize, demonize, destroy, annihilate. In our words or in our actions or simply in our thoughts, who among us has never felt the desire to destroy another person? And if we didn't feel this desire naturally as children, we were taught to feel it: A man I know in his sixties still remembers coming out of chapel as a boy at the Episcopal high school he attended in Philadelphia—he had just heard the chaplain preach on Jesus' admonition to love your neighbors, and with God's help to love your enemies—and he was really trying to understand this concept, what it meant. When he arrived at football practice that day, his coach looked at the team and said, "I want you to destroy the other team, just crush them, annihilate them, hurt them if you have to." And thus began for him the tension that he has felt ever since between the message and person of Jesus, and the message of culture and sometimes the message and person of his own human heart.

There is a reason why it is painful to look on the Cross where Jesus hangs: it hurts to see what our own fear can do to others in the name of law and order, in the name of peace and religion and solid governance. Tonight is not merely about a Roman ruler named Pilate or a Jewish crowd; tonight is about God's ways in Jesus smacking up against our ways, and our ways trying to stamp out God's ways once and for all. We can look at someone from an opposing political party or social ideology or religious tradition and wonder how they got to be so stuck in their foolish ways, but Good Friday is about all of us human creatures on some level being stuck in ways that hurt ourselves and hurt others. The meaning of sin, as Martin Luther puts it, is not any singular immoral act but is the state of being stuck with no self-awareness that you are stuck. And the only thing that can get us un-stuck, the only thing that can break through and bring true self-awareness is the God-awareness from Jesus on the Cross. Exposed is our preference for the way things are without Jesus going and messing everything up. Exposed is our culture's assumption that of course violence and death should have the last word.

What is remarkable to me, and what makes tonight not simply Friday or Shameful Friday but what makes it "Good" Friday is that Jesus is not like a parent who wants you to know how wrong you are. He simply wants you to join him in being freed from the forces within yourself and within our culture that assume that fear and violence and death are the norms of life. Jesus wants you to be un-stuck from the assumption that these are the only options in life.

The Apostle Paul, who effectively started the Christian Church, never called followers of Jesus "Christians". He called them "ministers of reconciliation". That is, people who carry in our bodies the message of Jesus that the violence stops here, with us; people who carry in our bodies the message that we will not return hate with hate or violence with violence. The best kept secret of the Christian life is that the way of the Cross is the way of life because we are set free from the compulsion to be conformed to this world—and instead we are transformed by the Spirit of

God dwelling in our bodies, dwelling in our relationships, dwelling in our homes, making us ministers of God's reconciling love.

Barbara Campbell, the Diocesan poet of Connecticut, recently wrote this after the tragic shootings in Newtown, Connecticut:

"Take up your cross, the cross by which we are marked in baptism, and follow me, Jesus said. There are dangers in leading, which is demonstrated by President Lincoln's assassination and the assassinations of Presidents Garfield, McKinley, and Kennedy. There is also courage in leading, as expressed by the child in Sandy Hook Elementary School who said during the shooting, "I know karate. It's OK. I'll lead us out."

Leading is challenging because the culture in which one leads continually changes. Leading is having the vision for new directions...Leadership is sensitivity that identifies when an event has to have a response. These events keep overwhelming us whether it be Newtown, or Hadiya Pendleton who marched in Washington in the Inauguration and was killed in Chicago, or Malala Yousafzai shot in the head for advocating education for girls in Pakistan, or Matthew Shephard left to die on a fence in Wyoming. The journey can be long and hard.

We need to say, "Yes" to leadership. Accept God's grace and truth, let our hearts be filled with God's holy and life-giving Spirit, and follow, by loving others. Sometimes we need to say, "I know Christ. It's OK. I'll lead."