

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Reflections for the Maundy Thursday Communion Service April 1, 2010
Readings: Luke 22:13-18, 31-34, 41-42, 63-65; 23:34-38, 46-47

REMEMBERING JESUS IN HIS PASSION

Having broken the bread, Jesus says to his disciples, “Do this remembering me.” Tonight, we are those who remember him and what he suffered for our sake. For the Bible, remembering involves much more than mental recall because it re-engages us with Jesus on that last night and day of his life, enabling us to walk with him and witness his confrontation with this world’s cruelty and desperate need for God’s redemptive love. To remember is to care and so be moved to action.

To “do this” Lord’s Supper remembering Jesus, we will listen to six short readings from Luke’s account of that Thursday night and Friday from the Passover meal to Jesus’ final breath on the cross. I will offer a brief reflection on each reading, followed by a prayer, an anthem, or one verse of the hymn, “Go to Dark Gethsemane.”

So they went and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal. When the hour came, (Jesus) took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, “Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.”

Passover was for Israel the ancient night of deliverance from slavery in Egypt, and so it was for Jesus and his disciples as it is for Jews to this day and for all time, a reaffirmation of their life as God’s beloved people set free from the humiliation and hopelessness of bondage and called to be a living testimony to the Creator’s love for this world. We notice that Luke now calls Jesus’ disciples “the apostles,” for so he knows them and so they now become. An apostle is one sent out as a witness and representative, an ambassador. Our Communion with Jesus Christ is not just a private comfort or spiritual exercise for our edification. Yes, here our faith is renewed, our hope nourished, and the bonds of our life in the faith’s community strengthened, but not so we can keep faith, hope, and love to ourselves. Jesus’ eye is on the world that lives in mortal need of becoming God’s world anew, healed and brought into the freedom of being governed by God’s love and mercy. Jesus tells them he will not eat the bread again until the Passover of deliverance is fulfilled under the reign of God’s redeeming love.

(Prayer)

“Simon,” (Jesus said), “Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” And he said to him, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!” Jesus said, “I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me.”

Jesus knows the weaknesses of the man he has nicknamed “the Rock.” Simon the Rock is passionate with good intentions and bravado before the danger comes, but he will back away to save himself. What I find most encouraging here for us is that Jesus corrects Peter about his true nature but without any scorn for the weakness of his disciple and friend. There is no sarcasm, no taunt or put-down. Despite Peter’s moment of cowardice, Jesus will rely upon him to serve as a leader among the apostles. This is redemption. Jesus will enable Simon Peter to transform his shame into a powerful understanding of the weaknesses of other people who also fail, if less dramatically and poignantly than Peter himself. Even more than courage, empathy and compassion are the qualities Jesus needs in leaders of his people. God’s grace picks up what has been shameful and turns it to good so it strengthens us for service and so we can, in turn, strengthen our sisters and brothers.

(Hymn No. 97 “Go to Dark Gethsemane” First Stanza)

Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed,
“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.”

Jesus’ pain, humiliation, and death are no passion play, no drama pre-scripted by God in which Jesus just recites his lines and plays his part until the curtains fall so it can quickly rise again on Easter morning for him to take his bows and all to bow before him. The word “crucifixion” means torture, and its intent was to be a public humiliation by torture in the sight of all who might even consider rebelling against the power of Rome. The rebel was pinned up, naked, screaming, cursing, and writhing, hour upon hour, sometimes for days, while he was mocked and taunted as a lesson for all to see. Crucifixion was the darkest side of Roman law and the renowned Pax Romana, the “Roman Peace,” maintained by force and threat and, when deemed necessary, by this terrible public brutality.

In Gethsemane, we see the struggle. Jesus is no zealot seeking glory in martyrdom. He has so much to offer, but the world does not want it. Not by any accident or ignorance does the world reject the love and mercy of God. The world wants winners, which means many must be losers. People crave power and success, which require others to submit to them, to fail, to live and labor

as their inferiors. After all, one cannot be superior without inferiors or special if there are no run of the mill people to be more special than. It is only by complete commitment to God's desire for a world redeemed that Jesus finds the strength to go forward and be shamed, tortured, and killed.

(Choir Anthem "The Garden" L. Shackley)

Now the men who were holding Jesus began to mock him and beat him; they also blindfolded him and kept asking him, "Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?" They kept heaping many other insults on him.

So the shaming of Jesus begins. We can say, rightly, that he did not deserve shame, but then we need to understand that people do not need to deserve their shame in order to feel it. We forget that inborn reality of our human emotional system, and so we assume that people who live in humiliating conditions or seem ashamed of being who and what they are must somehow or other deserve their shame. No, it is not true. Shame does not have to be deserved to be felt and so do its damage to the human spirit. Most of the anger and most of the depression also in our world are based in shame and humiliation. For centuries, we Christians have said that Jesus bore our sin, and so he did, but we have not always realized he bore also our shame and made it his own.

(Hymn No. 97 "Go to Dark Gethsemane" Second Stanza)

Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

On the cross, forgiveness collides head-on with proud contempt and enraged cruelty. Jesus just does not get it, does he? Can he not see even now that he is the one who has offended and should be begging forgiveness? He hangs condemned for blasphemy against God and rebellion against the law and order of the prevailing empire. People who think of Jesus' forgiving his tormentors as a nicety, a divine sweetness, do not understand the conflict. His forgiving the leaders of his people and the rulers of the world for what they are doing to him is to them an outrage against all religious authority and secular power. He is the heretic, the rebel, the man (in their eyes) justly condemned who should be penitent. And he dares forgive them! So they mock him even more, clinging to their authority and self-justifying positions of power and prestige.

The sign put over Jesus' head on the cross was meant to mock him and his people, the Jews. Rome meant it to say, "This is what a king of the Jews looks like, and this is his proper place in the empire."

Forgiveness is not just Jesus' way of being better than his enemies. It is God's challenge to human power and to the way this world works.

(Hymn No. 97 "Go to Dark Gethsemane" Third Stanza)

Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was innocent."

Jesus, the Son of God, died, and with him all the hopes of his disciples and followers. First and foremost, crucifixion was a public humiliation intended as a lesson for all to see and learn, but because it was shaming by torture as well as mockery, the pain and suffering were extreme, and the only relief, the only salvation for the victim, came from death. It may have seemed that death was Jesus' only savior. He died cursed, outside the holy city and outside the covenant between God and Israel. He died a heretic and a blasphemer. But Luke again lets us hear a voice of dissent, this time from a Roman centurion overseeing the crucifixion. Surely, this man was innocent, and his was a wrongful execution.

Countless people have died wrongfully in the history of this world, and millions are forced by circumstances or cruelty to live wrongfully as well. Life is not fair. Our human systems are not fair, even when they try to be, let alone when they favor the already advantaged. We do well to remember, whenever we feel tempted to discount unfairness to one person or to one small or unpopular group as "just the way life is, just the way it goes," that among those whose sufferings were so discounted is the Son of God. The victim of convenient injustice is his sister or brother.

Jesus went to the cross for God and for us, because God loves us and God's love is what we need to be truly alive and human. In the sacrament of Communion, we hold in our hands and take into our living bodies the symbolic elements that bring us before the cross to share with us tonight the brokenness and bloodshed that express fully the love and mercy of God. Let us pray for the Spirit's help in continuing to remember Jesus' passion in the full sense of remembering. Then life each day will become more and more for us life before the cross of Jesus Christ, whether we happen to be joyous and carefree at the moment or sad and discouraged or even grief-stricken. None of life will be any longer just something that happens in isolation from the Christ who gave himself for us, because God loves us — all of us — beyond measure. Amen.

(Prayer)