

St. Andrew's ~ Good Friday ~ April 13, 2017 ~ Cherry Haisten

Good Friday is the "most desolate of days," in the words of Fr. Rich.

It's hard to see what's good about it, and as you can see by this enormous crowd gathered here tonight, many people would rather skip it.

What's good about this desolate day? The narrative we hear from John every year on Good Friday contains all the big, tragic elements of the human condition we would rather ignore or deny—betrayal, violence, death. If we do acknowledge these, we habitually blame them on others—in the case of John on "the Jews," in the case of contemporary American society, on "the Muslims." Through history the Christians have often been the ones blamed. It doesn't particularly matter what the group is as long as we can project our violent impulses, our betrayals, and our fear of death onto those "others." ⁱ

Fear of death, blindness to our own violence, denial of our betrayals—these human tendencies drive us straight into our addictions and compulsions so we can maintain our obliviousness and run away from our pain. But love is letting go of fear, as goes the title of that old book. Jesus showed us the way of love. "Fear not!" is one of his refrains in the gospels. "Love one another."

Last Saturday was the 110th anniversary of the birth of my grandmother. I spent a lot of the day ruminating over the mystery of life and death. My father-in-law has almost reached 99. My grandmother was born only slightly more than a decade before he was born, yet she has been dead for almost 50 years. My sisters and cousins and I—spread out around the country, each in a different state—shared a long sequence of text messages during the day reminiscing about our grandmother and some of her bad habits and funny preferences. She loved chocolate, especially little Baby Ruths. She chewed only a half stick at a time of her favorite Juicy Fruit gum. My sister pointed out that she was being dainty to make up for her un-lady-like behavior. That led to cigarettes. "Anyone remember our grandmother's brand?" my cousin asked. "I know that's morbid but living in a Pall Mall household has that effect on a person."

His mother, my aunt, smoked at least a pack a day and died at 73 of a stroke. "I deserve stock in the [blank-blank] company," he joked.

"Our grandmother smoked Pall Malls too," I wrote back, "until the cancer research came out and she switched to Benson and Hedges because she thought those might not be as bad." Ironic but no joke. She was horribly wrong and died of lung cancer at 61.

"Cherry did what family elders do [me, a family elder!] and sobered my smart-aleck self right up with her answer," my cousin responded.

Thinking of death IS sobering.

When we sobered up we were there face to face with the pain and tragedy of our grandmother's death. It was a lot easier to stay with the superficial joking.

Good Friday is sobering—or can be if we enter it fully and deeply, if we do more than superficially serve our time for an hour on Friday evening.

Sobering means free from excess, extravagance, or exaggeration; it means not engaging in folly

Good Friday calls us from our indulgence in self-deception, from our extremes, frivolity and folly, to what is deadly serious, to bear witness to the sordid possibilities and consequences of human violence. It takes courage, heartfelt and committed, to stay with Christ and keep watch as our fellow human beings crucify him, to keep watch every day when Christ is bombed and tortured and executed and killed in all manner of violence. No groups are immune. Do I, do you, have the courage, the love, to stay and be present? “So could you not stay awake with me one hour?” Jesus asks Peter with great disappointment when he finds the disciples asleep in the garden. (Matthew 26: 40)

“Jesus obviously walked on a collision course with the leaders of his day . . . ,” writes one theologian.ⁱⁱ “To seek to mediate God’s transforming love was risky business, and Jesus must have realized that. In that context the perplexing question [is] . . . why Jesus did not cease from his preaching, teaching, healing, and forgiving ministry so as to avoid such persecution.”

What would you have done? Would you have ceased your work, your activities the authorities saw as threatening? That’s probably what I would have done. It’s what I often do—back off to keep the peace, to maintain the status quo, to avoid confrontation, anything but rock the boat. And I usually view this as a good thing. Yet there are times we must risk disturbing the peace, risk losing what passes for love. There comes a time when we “find ourselves in a courtyard where we must answer whether we know him or not,” as poet Ann Weems puts it.ⁱⁱⁱ Even in those times the temptation is to avoid, to back off, to slink into invisibility, as Peter tried to do when in the courtyard he denied Christ three times.

Jesus was tempted too. “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,” we are told in Hebrews, “but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15) We often try to squirm out of the unpleasant challenges and hard realities of our lives. Like us, Jesus had his “squirm point” when he momentarily tried to escape. “Let this cup pass from me,” he prayed.

If you remember Nikos Kazantzakis’s novel “The Last Temptation of Christ,” Jesus is tempted in an imaginative flash forward to give up on his whole mission and ministry, to backtrack and backpeddle and make peace with the emperor and the people to avoid death and to be able to live out a “normal” life, marrying Mary Magdalene and having children and grandchildren.

So why didn’t Christ back out? Why did he make this sacrifice?

Jesus lived and died to show us another way, as Walter Wink puts it.

“Christ died for us in order to expose our world of violence for what it is.”^{iv}

He sacrificed his life for us so that all human beings could see and experience the violence done to the beloved we call “Our Lord.” That example was intended to do away with human sacrifice and scapegoating and violence for all time. Theoretically seeing that violence would lead us to repent of our part in it and to turn to the way of peace and love out of love for him and all he loves—all humanity. But first we have to see it for what it is. Let those who have eyes see, Jesus said.

Truth is we hardly ever look. We might peek through our fingers as we do at a horror movie to get a glimpse, but can we fix our gaze long enough to truly feel the suffering of others? To be present to the suffering? Can we love that much?

The words from that great old African American spiritual “Were you there?” may be ringing in your ears. They are almost an indictment. No, we weren’t there. We were absent when we were called to be present. We ARE absent to the stranger, the hungry and thirsty, the sick and those in prison. What we do or don’t do to one of the least of these, we do or don’t do to Christ. (See Matthew 25:34-26, esp 40)

Christ wants us to answer the roll call here and now and say, Present! It’s too late if we just show up when the roll is called up yonder!

Witness we must bear, in the words of writer Margaret Atwood. Look unflinchingly now. Let ourselves look until we see. Let ourselves experience what we see and our own reactions. There is something terribly wrong if we are drawn to the suffering of others because we enjoy it, but it’s also pathological to deny it entirely. Instead we welcome what we experience with compassion knowing God is present with us and Christ in our midst. We welcome Christ.

If we allow it to, Good Friday takes us to the deepest pain in our hearts, to what Tillie Olsen called that place inside that has held a tear so long. Good Friday is the heart of darkness, the depth of human woundedness.

How can that wound be healed? Seems impossible yet here and now, this very moment, this Good Friday, we are given the gift of time to enter the wound with Christ. That is the moment of crucifixion—death to the wound so that we can rise again and live.

In a few minutes, a cross will be brought into the nave and up to the altar steps. We will be invited to “reverence” the cross. This reverencing can be done in many ways. You may walk up and stand by the cross. You may kneel beside it. You may touch it or lay your hand on it for a few minutes. You might touch your forehead to it and even shed a tear on it.

So that we can be as present as possible when we do this, let’s practice right now. If you would like, close your eyes. Take a minute to notice what you are experiencing in your body. Notice your physical responses and reactions. Let yourself feel the deep wound. Find the place of woundedness inside, your own or that of others that you carry. Find that scar tissue that has held a tear so long. Be there for a moment with the pain, with the tears, held onto or shed. Bring compassion to those parts of yourself that blame others instead of accepting

responsibility, to your betrayals and violence. And bring that same compassion to those human beings just like us who did such violence to Jesus.

Christ is with you in this very moment, in your pain and woundedness. Allow yourself if you can to be vulnerable and open. Let Christ's love in. Let Christ heal you. We are often absent but God is present with us always. For these few minutes, let us be present.

The Good News of Good Friday is the transformation process—stripping us of all that separates us from God and assuring us of God's love so that we can be loving enough to be sober, to be present to Christ in his suffering, to ourselves and to all humanity. On Good Friday we enter into the tragedy of the human condition. But that's not the end of the story. Comedies end with marriages or other happily ever afters. Just wait. Ride out the squirm, acknowledge the wound and feel the pain. Then very soon we will get to the happily ever after of the resurrection—new life, the joy of Easter.

But for now on this Good Friday, this most desolate of days, stay here and keep watch. Watch at the cross. Watch and pray. Show up and be present to the Passion. Love Christ as Christ loves us.

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ⁱ Migliore 158

ⁱⁱ Gerard H. Luttenberger 188

ⁱⁱⁱ *Kneeling in Jerusalem* 17 (Louisville: Westminster, 1992).

^{iv} Migliore 160