

Good Friday, 2010

On Maundy Thursday of my first year in seminary, we witnessed the stripping of the altar early in the morning at our daily chapel service. Lucas Grubbs, then curate here at Christ Church, was our celebrant. While we recited Psalm 22, the altar was emptied, and then Lucas washed it - scrubbed it really - with an intensity that matched the words of the psalm. He dried it, and then laid a chalice on its side in the middle of the altar, and he left.

It was an incredibly powerful moment for all of us. We were struck by the finality, the emptiness, the sorrow. As was our custom, we left the chapel and headed to the room where we always had coffee and toast. We were silent; somber; exchanging glances but no words; the only sound that of coffee pouring into cups, and the crinkle of bread wrappers.

The Dean stepped into the doorway, observed us all for a moment or two, and then said, "Well now, you know, He's not really dead." First we were shocked, then we laughed, and the somber mood was broken.

I tell this story because it speaks to me of two truths. The first is that we must go to the foot of the cross. The second is that we are not meant to stay there.

Crosses are everywhere in our society. We see them on the side of the road marking the site of a fatality. We wear them as jewelry, proclaiming our Christian beliefs to others and ourselves. We put them in our houses to have a reminder of our salvation. The media love to compose photos that show the likeness of a cross in the midst of a disaster. They are in our churches, around our necks, on the side of the highway, on T.V., and in the newspaper.

In secular culture the cross seems to represent a sorrow that cannot be expressed in words, and a hope in something greater than the perils of this world. For Christians it is so much more. The cross is the central symbol of our faith representing a power so great, a sacrifice so complete, a love so large, a mercy so encompassing, and a life never ending.

One of my favorite theologians, F.D. Maurice, wrote that Christ's sacrifice on the cross, Christ's bloody death, was the means by which Christ was reunited with God, thereby reuniting mankind with God. It is the moment of death, The moment when Christ obeyed fully the will of God, the moment when Christ defeated the power of sin, the moment of complete and perfect sacrifice, the moment when we, as children created in the image of God, are able to understand ourselves that way: as beings created in the perfect image of God. A perfection realized in the person of Jesus, and brought near to us in Christ's death on the cross. The only real thing about us, according to Maurice, is that we are God's children. And our status as God's children, is affirmed once and for all time in Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

And so it is here, at the foot of the cross, that we are united with God. And it is here, at the foot of the cross, that we bring our brokenness, our sorrow, our pain, our sin, to be given over to Christ. To be given over to Christ's sacrifice and brought into Christ's reunion with God. It is at the foot of the cross that we are washed in Christ's blood, showered in Christ's mercy, and fully embraced in the love of the triune God.

But it is also here, at the foot of the cross, that we can see beyond the powers of death, the powers of sin, to the empty tomb. Our resurrection hope, our joy in the risen Lord, is not only for the time of our

final earthly death, but in each time we bring ourselves to the cross. Each time we lay down a sin; a sorrow; a pain; a piece of our brokenness that calls us away from God. Each time we come to the cross, we see the empty tomb. Each time we lay down a piece of our brokenness we are resurrected to *this* life, and prepared for the life to come.

This is the truth of God's love for us. No sin is too great, no burden too heavy, no sorrow so deep that Christ cannot take it for us.

But this is hard work. It requires us to come willingly to the cross, to come willingly to the love of Christ, to be willing to let go of whatever it is we have brought with us: fear, anxiety, hate, doubt - all of it. And it is hard work to accept God's mercy.

One afternoon last fall I met a man in this church. His name is Mike. He had not intended to come in, but he had stopped to help a physically disabled woman, a stranger to him, up the steps and into the church. To do this, he had to leave his worldly goods, stacked up in a shopping cart, outside on the sidewalk. Then he had to carry the woman, and her wheelchair, up the steps. When I walked in she appeared to be helping him through a ceremony of candle lighting at the shrine. I introduced myself and we got to talking. He told me a little about himself, then began to cry. He had no intention of coming into the church, but once inside he was driven to seek solace.

He was a Vietnam veteran and had done, in his words, unspeakable things during the war. He was absolutely certain that he should never be forgiven for what he did. That God could not and should not love him because of what he did. That no one should love him because of what he did. He sobbed and sobbed.

I did my best to talk with him about God's mercy and forgiveness; about a love so large that we can't understand it; about the power of the cross; and about the goodness in his heart, and the generosity of his actions in helping a stranger. His only response came through his sobs, "You don't know what I've done."

This is a man whose journey has brought him to the foot of the cross. Somehow he knows he needs to be there, but he can't look up. He can't receive the love of Christ; the mercy of Christ's sacrifice. He can't see the empty tomb, and the life waiting for him there. He can't see the love of those gathered at the foot of the cross with him; the love of those willing to walk with him, to pick him up, to help him look up, and to show him the empty tomb. He is stuck.

It is hard to believe in God's mercy. And it is hard to receive that mercy at the foot of a bloody cross. Yet, that is where it is to be found. It is at the foot of the cross that our brokenness is united with Christ's perfection and we are resurrected to new life.

And there is yet another gift to be gained there at the foot of the cross. It is here that we also find one another. Companions on the way. The family of God. "Son behold your mother." "Woman behold your son."

But this also is hard. It is hard to walk with someone else all the way to the cross; to stay there with them while they lay down their burden; to wait patiently in love; and then rejoice with them in the resurrection. It is hard work. Peter couldn't do it. He couldn't walk all the way with Jesus. He couldn't watch the sacrifice. He couldn't defend the truth he knew.

But the good news is that God never stops looking for us. God never stops offering the cross and the empty tomb, the mercy and the love. Peter's fear is healed in the love of the cross. Our brokenness is healed in the love of the cross. My sin is healed in the love of the cross.

The year before I entered seminary, I served as an intern in a parish in Washington D.C. As part of my internship I was asked to redesign their Good Friday service. This was a three hour service that drew most of the congregation and many visitors. They gave me programs from previous years as a guide and the rector served as my editor. I handed in my first draft and, while most of what I had done was okay, I had left out a key element. It seems that their veneration of the cross traditionally included an opportunity to hammer in nails. I had removed that element as it seemed, well, kind of over dramatic to me.

At the request of the rector I added it back in. The day of the service came, and we were about two hours into it when the large wooden cross was brought out before the people. While we knelt in prayer, sang hymns, and recited psalm 51, I watched lawyers and housewives, homeless and students, neighbors and strangers, men and women, come to the cross and, weeping, hammer in a nail, kiss the hard wood, and leave. I got up and joined the line. And as I approached the cross, I had three distinct reactions:

First, I wanted to run away. Like Peter I wanted to turn away and hide my head in the sand; to protect myself from the coming horror. As I got closer, I wanted to throw myself on the cross, to protect Jesus, to stop it all from happening. Then there I was, kneeling at the foot of the cross, not quite knowing how I got there. And before I could stop myself, I had picked up a nail, and the hammer and, weeping, drove a large nail into the hard wood of the cross.

Somehow my body knew what my mind couldn't fathom. In order for Jesus' death to have meaning; in order for my salvation to have meaning, I had to bring my brokenness in contact with Jesus' perfection.

Today you will be offered an opportunity to venerate the cross. I invite you to prayerfully consider how it might change you to kneel at the foot of that cross; to behold the ultimate sacrifice; to gaze on the image of your savior; to allow your brokenness to touch the perfection of God made man. And to be changed. Resurrected. My friends, this is the way to the empty tomb and the joy of Eastertide.

Some of you may be wondering what happened to Mike. I never saw him again. But I like to think that he continued to dwell at the foot of the cross, and that those he met there loved him and waited, patiently, for him to look up, to touch the perfection of Jesus, to allow himself to feel the mercy and the love, and finally, to look beyond the cross and behold the empty tomb.

Sermon by Mtr Greta Getlein
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