



ALL SAINTS CHURCH

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

“Good Friday 2.0”

A meditation by the Rev. Susan Russell

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So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him. First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die on behalf of the people.

Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, but Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in. The woman said to Peter, “You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?” He said, “I am not.” Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing around it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself.

Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. Jesus answered, “I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said.” When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, “Is that how you answer the high priest?” Jesus answered, “If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?” Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, “You are not also one of his disciples, are you?” He denied it and said, “I am not.” One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, “Did I not see you in the garden with him?” Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.

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Just days before – during the triumphal entry into Jerusalem – when the Pharisees had challenged Jesus to rebuke his disciples for their “Hosannas” Jesus had replied, “I tell you, if they were to keep silent, the very stones would cry out.”

What a difference a week makes. Today there are no hosannas. No palm waving crowds. No “Blessed is the One who comes in the name of our God.” And not even any stones shouting out – just a cock crow echoing in the silence of betrayal and denial.

Soon they will stand at the foot of the cross where the life -- the promise -- the light that shone so brightly in the Jesus they knew as son, teacher, leader and friend will be extinguished. All that would remain of the rabbi from Nazareth was a broken body and the broken dreams of his scattered followers. The Kingdom he proclaimed had not come. The powerful remained powerful: the oppressed remain oppressed -- and where there had been hope there is only despair.

And yet we call this Friday “Good” -- because even the worst that we can do cannot kill the love of God.

The amazing promise of this Good Friday is that even at the foot of the cross ... in the midst of the pain and agony and betrayal and denial ... the love greater than the worst the world could do to it never wavered ... but prayed, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

And they didn’t. Know what they had done ... were doing. None of them. Not really. Not the ones who nailed him to the cross. And not the ones who followed him there. Not even the ones who had been the closest to him – who had trudged along with him all over Galilee as he preached and taught and healed and proclaimed the good news of God’s love made present and available for all. How many times during his earthly ministry did Jesus have to take a time out to explain to his clueless disciples what was going on – to remind them what the “mission statement” was – what the “strategic plan” looked like? **Love God and love your neighbors as yourself. On those two hang all the law and the prophets.**

“Right, right,” they’d say. “But when are we going to rise up and throw the Romans out? And why can’t we build a booth up on the top of the mountain and hang out with Moses and Elijah? And when we take over can me and my brother sit on your right hand? Please?”

The scriptures are full of examples of just how much the disciples didn’t “get” what this Jesus of Nazareth was about. What the kingdom was he came to proclaim was meant to be. I’ve sometimes wondered if all the times we read about when Jesus “went off to a quiet place to pray” one of his prayers wasn’t, “And could you send me another twelve disciples? This bunch doesn’t seem to be catching on and I’m running out of time!”

Even at the last – on Maundy Thursday when Jesus washed the feet of the disciples as they ate their last meal together in that upper room and Peter protested at the very idea of Jesus washing their feet, Jesus responded to him, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

It turns out that this “kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven” thing comes with a steep learning curve. The disciples struggled to understand it in the 1st century just as we continue in that struggle in the 21st. And I think I heard Jesus saying, “Father, forgive them for they don’t

know what they are doing" last night was I watched the evening news after our service of foot washing here at All Saints Church. I wondered as I watched if the church had spent more of the last 2000 years washing feet and less fighting over doctrines if the kingdom might just be closer to coming!

Serene Jones in her teachings for us here at All Saints during Lent talked about the impact of trauma and its power to create cycles of violence by recreating and reliving the original trauma over and over in different contexts. And just as we can look at scripture and see the disciples "not getting it" over and over we can look at the history of the church and see it "not getting it" over and over and OVER again ... repeating the cycle by participating in the nailing to the cross of the empire the inclusive love of God made available to absolutely everybody.

Robert Shahan, when he was the Bishop of Arizona famously said, "**Faith is what you are willing to die for. Dogma is what you are willing to kill for.**" Jesus didn't come to give us dogma to kill for -- he came with a willingness to die for the sake of the message that the Kingdom of God is at hand: the Reign of God is about to be realized. It is here. It is now. He came with a message of inclusiveness and compassion: compassion in the truest sense of the word. The Latin word for passion means "suffering": the combined form of "compassion" means "with suffering."

It is an invitation to enter INTO the world's suffering – not to create an institution to exacerbate the world's suffering by preaching exclusion and proclaiming a narrow sectarianism based on dogmas it has too often been too ready to kill for. And when the church has chosen the latter rather than the former, it has recreated the trauma of Peter's denial of Jesus' core values and message as surely as if it stood again in that courtyard in Jerusalem and said, "I do not know him."

Verna Dozier in her wonderful book "The Dream of God" describes it thus: *"The people of the resurrection made the incomprehensible gift of grace into a structure. [Rejecting] the frighteningly free gift of God go be a new thing in the world – a witness that all of life could be different for everybody – this gift was harnessed by an institution that established a hierarchy of those who "know" above the great mass of those who must be told."* [pg. 4]

And so -- for generations -- those of us who "must be told" were told all kinds of things about what Jesus' life and death and resurrection meant. And a great many of them bore little or no resemblance to the actual life and witness of the one the church claims to follow – of the Jesus ...

- who put table fellowship at the center of his life,
- who ate with outcasts,
- who welcomed sinners,
- who proclaimed the year of the Lord's favor,
- who was so centered in God's abundant love that he was willing to speak truth to power from that first sermon that almost got him thrown off the cliff by his irate Nazarene homies to his last cross-examination by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea.

Instead we were given doctrines we were supposed to digest and not delve into, creeds we were supposed to recite and not question, Scriptures we were supposed to memorize and not contextualize. And the Good Friday story we were supposed to get in line behind is outlined by a colleague as: "Jesus died on the cross for your sins, and he's going to come down and beat you up if you don't pay him back."

And then they wondered why they were having trouble growing the church! The stumbling block for so many has nothing to do with the good news of God in Christ Jesus and everything to do with the disconnect between the stories **Jesus** told of a loving God calling the whole human family into relationship with God and with each other and the story the **church** was telling – a story that perpetuates the cycle of trauma generation after generation.

Father, forgive us, because we do NOT know what we are doing!

So what if we stopped doing it. What if we could find a way to break that cycle of trauma by shifting to what I've come to think of as **Good Friday 2.0**. We've been doing a lot of work in the communication department here at All Saints Church around all the ways we have to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ Jesus in what is being described as a "**Web 2.0 World**." What I think I've come to understand about that – and I *am* just a beginner – is that we are in the middle of a paradigm shift from what we used to call an "information superhighway" to an "interaction superhighway."

We are just beginning to imagine how we can use tools for communication and community that didn't even exist a few years ago. Smarter people than me are calling these changes **the 21st century version** of the "rock the world" transitions the Gutenberg printing press brought in the 15th century.

So what does that have to do with Good Friday in general and Good Friday 2.0 in specific? It has to do with finally maybe "getting" what so eluded the disciples about Jesus' message of God's inclusive love.

In my senior year in seminary I remember my male, Roman Catholic theology professor bewailing the fact that there seemed to be no "unifying voice" emerging as the top dog theologian to set the course for the current era of theological discourse. "Where is the Thomas Aquinas – the Martin Luther – the Karl Barth" he lamented. And I remember I got in some trouble around our final paper for the class – which was an assignment to pick and then defend our choice of theologian for the 21st century ... kind of like "Survivor: The Theologian Version."

I didn't write that paper. Instead, I wrote an overview of the theologians we'd studied and then told a story about all of them. In the story they were a bunch of dirty little boys playing in my backyard. (Remember – I was the mother of two dirty little boys at that point in my life!) Anyway, I had them out in the backyard playing "king of the hill" and trying to knock each other off the top of the sand pile ... not by pushing and shoving but by dueling doctrines and philosophically congruent justifications of their positions.

In my story -- after letting them bash it out for a bit in the backyard -- Mother calls them all inside. She makes them wash up and then settle down in the playroom where she brings out the buckets of Legos. And she tells them to each build their best and most brilliant design of what they think the kingdom looks like. And then -- when they were all done -- She helped them see where they connected ... how they could snap and click together on a corner here and an edge there.

And when they were done there was a magnificent creation set in the middle of the playroom ... with a unity brought about not by the trauma induced uniformity -- not by the beating of “the other” into submission of one dominant voice -- but by looking for where the connections were amid the differences. And then ... as I recall -- the story ended with Mother inviting ALL the little boys to come gather around the table ... for milk and cookies.

And THAT ... I said in my paper my senior year in seminary ... is what theology should look like in the 21st century: connected rather than competitive, with theologians following the King of Love, not trying to become the King of the Hill.

I don't remember what grade I got -- but at this point, who cares? It was a long time ago -- but it sticks with me as a glimpse of what a 2.0 world *could* look like ... a world where we actually walked in love as Christ loved us and gave himself as an offering and witness to that love. A world where we risked speaking up -- like Peter DIDN'T.

To challenge those who perpetuate violence and trauma in the name of the One who came to show us how to walk in love -- whether it is as extreme as the violence of a “Christian militia” plotting to kill law enforcement officers or as inconceivable as the trauma of religious leaders covering up clergy child abuse. When it is as insidious as Anglican Archbishops explicitly promoting homophobia to perpetuate polarization and marginalization, talk show hosts dismissing those who take Jesus' call to seek and serve the least of these as “social justice/political correctness” or the incomprehensible the picketing the funerals of fallen American soldiers in the name of a God who hates.

Because Good Friday 2.0 puts us at the foot of the cross where hangs not the King of the Hill but the King of Love. Just as the Web 2.0 world challenges us to not only share information but to risk interaction, Good Friday 2.0 challenges us to not just stand at the foot of the cross but to *act* from the foot of the cross ... act to end the cycle of the trauma and violence of insisting our theology -- our faith seeking understanding -- is worth killing for.

And -- most importantly -- to claim the power of what is good about Good Friday: that even the worst that we can do cannot kill the love of God for each and every member of the human family.

Amen.

PRAYER(S)

O God, you have made of one blood all the peoples of the earth, and sent your blessed Son to preach peace to those who are far off and to those who are near. Grant that people everywhere may seek after you and find you; pour out your Spirit upon all flesh and hasten the coming of your kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on your whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that in your good time, all nations and peoples may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.