

Good Friday 2020

Greetings in the midst of these unsettling times! I am recording this video from our basement, which seems more than appropriate for a Good Friday message.

I have no doubt that all of you have been affected by this pandemic – some certainly more so than others. My prayer is not only that the world would learn how to conquer this virus, but that it would also find news to cooperate and to live together. My Lenten motto continues to be: “Stay calm and keep the faith”.

I must admit that I do not like Good Friday worship services. In many churches, it is the least attended service during Holy Week. I think we all know why:

- We don't like dwelling on our brokenness – our sinfulness – our reoccurring, spiritual deficit disorder. Good Friday is all about taking a hard and painful look at ourselves.
- And then there are the crucifixions: a torturous mess of propaganda showcasing the abuse of power by the Romans.
- But what makes Good Friday the worst is that we see the human (our) capacity to do evil things. (I am already aware of Covid-19 scams. My wife says there is a special place in hell for those kinds of people). But if the truth be told, we were sick and not doing well long before this pandemic. We have long been carriers of the sin of self-centeredness, anger and prejudice.

And that is why Good Friday is essential in our faith walk. Our sinful and ugly side cannot be hidden on this day: in fact, it is in full display on the three Crosses outside of Jerusalem.

Over 20 years ago, I was serving a Denver area church where our Good Friday service was poorly attended. Every year, they did a Tenebrae Service. Tenebrae (meaning “darkness”) is a prolonged meditation on Christ's suffering that first started in the monasteries. Readings trace the story of Christ's passion, music portrays his pathos, and the power of silence and darkness suggests the drama of this momentous event. As lights are extinguished, people ponder the depth of Christ's suffering and death; we remember the cataclysmic nature of his sacrifice as we hear the overwhelming sound of the loud “strepitus” at the close of the service.

At this particular congregation, I made the decision to make the Good Friday service into a Youth Service. At first, I received some kick back about that decision. But I told our congregation that unless the youth had some ownership of Holy Week, they would not understand the significance of what happened - nor grow in faith. The youth spent much time putting the edgy service together, and it showed. Within three years, our Good Friday Youth Service was highly anticipated, and we often filled the sanctuary.

When we asked people what they liked about it, they responded that they didn't. It was edgy, raw, and full of untraditional elements. But it was how direct and forceful

the youth presented this Good Friday worship service that made it authentic. Good Friday is all about how wrong we live and how our daily choices are based on selfishness. It's everything we don't want it to be, but are.

Jesus was a threat to those who worshipped power, who sought to control and manipulate people. His inclusive love made a mockery of the barriers we erected between groups of people, either religious, economic, or gender related. He was deemed "dangerous" for those who wanted to maintain the status quo, even when the status quo – as it always seems to be – is merely keeping people in their "places".

During these trying days of the pandemic and self-isolation, we are vulnerable like never before. Much of our control and power has been stripped away, just the Lord was stripped of his clothing before he was strung up on the Cross. We are unsure of what will happen next, just as the disciples "self-isolated" into an upper room in fear of the religious and political authorities.

Father Richard Rohr gives us some challenging wisdom: *"In this time of suffering we have to ask ourselves, 'What are we going to do with our pain?' Are we going to blame others for it? Are we going to try to fix it? No one lives on this earth without it. It is the great teacher, although none of us want to admit it. If we do not transform our pain, we will transmit it in some form (to others)."*

Good Friday should be the time when we declare our vulnerability, admit that we are carriers of anxiety and pain, and look to the only one who both understands it and conquers it. Through the crucified Jesus of Good Friday, God identifies with us and the broken world we share together.

Final story: At several congregations that I have served, I played one song on Good Friday that tended to surprise many people: *"Sympathy for the Devil"* by the Rolling Stones. I have watched more than a few people squirm in their seats or pews to both the words and the music.

The first verse begins like this:

*Please allow me to introduce myself
I'm a man of wealth and taste
Been around for a long, long year
Stole many a man's soul to waste
I was 'round when Jesus Christ
Had his moment of doubt and pain
Made damn sure that Pilate
Washed his hands and sealed his fate*

It makes us uncomfortable because it implicates us in the brokenness of life:

*I watched with glee while your kings and queens
Fought for ten decades, for the gods they made
I shouted out "who killed the Kennedys?"
When after all - it was you and me*

Good Friday is all about squirming in our skins with our brokenness and selfishness. There is nothing that can make this day good or meaningful. Unless, of course, God would somehow redeem it. I guess that's another topic for another, even more important day! As the Apostles Creed says: "*And on the third day . . .*"

Yes Lord, we await the third day, especially in these times. Amen and amen.