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“Jesus and Suffering”

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March 29, 2009

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-5, 10-13; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

In the seminary where I studied a few years ago there was a pulpit in the chapel. The first thing you saw when you climbed up into that pulpit were these words, “Sir, we would see Jesus.” The words were inscribed on a small brass plate mounted to the pulpit. Every student, professor, guest preacher, came face to face with those words, and they were daunting.

“Sir, we would see Jesus.”

The plaque is no longer there, mainly because preachers are no longer a “sirs”. It was a helpful reminder that when we come to worship God we are all seekers, seeking something that speaks to the very depths of our lives. We are seeking something that is authentic, we are all looking for someone who has passion for life.

When we come together regardless of race or sexual preference or class we bring out common humanity. What binds us to each other are the common experiences that we have. We all know how to laugh together and we also know how to cry together. We know joy and we know sorrow. One of our common experiences is suffering and pain.

Our search for Jesus on this Sunday brings us to this central human experience. The pain of our lives cry out for some answer. All of us have experienced pain and suffering, all of us have know what it means to have been hurt, to cry out. It is at those moments that we often turn to God Almighty. “What in the world is going on here? If God is great and God is good, why is this happening to me?”

“Sir, we would see Jesus.”

It's an odd little story. Some Greeks wanted to see Jesus. They ask Philip. Philip tells Andrew and Philip and Andrew tell Jesus, "There are some Greeks looking for you." Jesus responds with a little story about a grain of wheat remaining just that, a single grain, unless it falls into the earth and dies, and then it produces much fruit. And then he teaches: those who love their lives, maintain the status quo, protect and conserve their lives, will lose them. But those who hate their lives, "lose their lives for my sake" will find them.

And then there are these haunting words, which over the years I have always found so compelling: Jesus said, "when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself. This was to show the manner of death he was to die."

When it happened, when he was lifted up from the earth, when he lived out the parable of the grain of wheat dying in order to live, when Jesus of Nazareth, in the full bloom of young adulthood, was crucified, something decisive, something compelling, something the human race has never been able to forget or ignore, happened. "I will be lifted up, and I will draw all of you to me."

This is the fifth Sunday of Lent and traditionally the fifth Sunday has been designated as Passion Sunday, the Sunday when we consider the meaning of the cross. It is the central symbol of our faith. It adorns our churches, hospitals, and health care organizations. It is perhaps the most popular item of jewelry in the whole history of jewelry. There are crosses on gold chains, crosses of gold and silver and wood, there are even tattoos of crosses.

With all the ways that we try to dress is up, it is still as the old hymn put it, "an emblem of suffering and shame." It was the way that the Roman government kept the people in line. They had the final power over you if you did not fall in line and obey them. They could hang you from a cross.

It is the symbol that has compelled great art, some of the greatest art in human history has been a result of the cross, for artist understood better the centrality of the cross in the Christian faith and how it emphasizes the suffering of Jesus. Our hymns pick it up too:

"O Sacred Head now wounded"

“For my sake my Lord should take frail flesh and die?”

“When I survey the wondrous cross”

“Beneath the cross of Jesus”

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?”

It is central to our faith, but it is also central to our understanding of our lives as God’s people. As we struggle and all of us struggle, what are we looking for in God? Are we looking for a God who will take away our suffering, or are we looking for a God who will share our suffering?

“Sir, we would see Jesus.”

Jesus who cared for those who suffered, who cared for those who were left out, who were sick, who were abandoned, who were struggling to get their life together. He gave his life to bring wholeness and it was not a pretty picture. He was hung on one of those symbols of suffering and pain, he went through the agony of dying, He cried out as we often cry out, “My God where are you, Remove this cup from me.” Finally He trusted in the only One that could bring peace, the presence and love of God.

Ernest Hemingway was no friend of institutional Christianity but he could not ignore the figure of Jesus, particularly his crucifixion. In an amazing short story called, Today Is Friday, three Roman soldiers are drinking in a bar after a particularly difficult Friday afternoon. They are rough, crude. One is not feeling well. The bartender gives him something for his stomach.

“Jesus Christ,” he says.

“He was pretty good out there,” another responds.

“Why didn’t he come down off the cross?”

“He didn’t want to come down.”

“Show me a guy who doesn’t want to come down off a cross,” the first soldier says. “I see a lot of them. Any time you show me one that doesn’t want to get down off the cross when the time comes, I’ll climb right up with him.”

And the other says, “I thought he was pretty good out there today.”

(The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway, p. 356)

He was a son of God but he suffered obedience. He suffered as we suffer. He died for those who are his followers, the poor, the oppressed, the persecuted, the hurting, those who need healing. He identified totally with us in our suffering.

My friends you can not have Christianity without the cross.

“When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself.”

At the end of *What Jesus Meant*, Garry Wills comes to Good Friday. He writes, “Dark and mysterious as is the whole matter of the Incarnation and the Passion, perhaps a single thing can help us think of them.” And then Wills relates a simple personal anecdote. His young son woke up one night crying. He had had a bad dream, a nightmare. When Wills asked what was troubling him, the little boy said that a nun in his school had told the children that they would end up in hell if they sinned. “Am I going to hell?” the little boy asked his father. Wills writes, “There is not an ounce of heroism in my nature, but I instantly announced what any father, any parent would: ‘All I can say is that if you’re going there, I’m going with you.’”

This is the final truth about suffering, the truth you can count on, the truth you can stake your life on.

There is no place, no hell, no suffering, no threat, not even death for which God does not say, “If you’re going, I’m going with you.”

That is one of the most important crucial meanings of the cross of Jesus Christ.

“When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself.”

And he did, and he does! Amen.