

Good Friday 2023

People of God, let us pray. God who is Love, we welcome your all-permeating presence with us as we wonder together on this most solemn of evenings in the circle of your church year. As we hold ourselves open to your transformative love stirring within our minds and spirits, grant us serenity to accept things that are not within our power to change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

We have moved from the empowering spirit of Palm Sunday, through the Maundy Thursday pause to listen to Jesus (our servant teacher) explain it all one last time, and into this excruciatingly painful day in the life and death of Jesus. Across the arc of this Holy Week, I have been thinking about running, or jogging. I have been remembering something my high school track coach would say to me as I started a 1-mile or 2-mile race in frigidly cold March and April northern Wisconsin weather. *“Give it your all, Gromoll. Leave it all out on the track. And I’ll be there at the finish line with a spatula to scrape you up.”* As unathletic as I was faithful in high school sports, I did often collapse – exhausted and crying at the finish line.

We could likely locate in various cultural and religious traditions our own rootedness in this concept that we ought to “give our all” to something. As Christians, we adore Jesus because of his steadfast willingness to ‘give his all’ as an unwavering model of divine love and justice. I am not the first and won’t be the last preacher for whom the story of Good Friday evokes imagery and sensations of running a race. In the book of Hebrews, an early follower of Jesus reminded first century Christians: *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.”* (Heb. 12: 1-2)

As we move through this time of reflection, we will wonder about the way in which Jesus persevered and what inhumanities he disregarded in order to fulfill his purpose.

Our friends have just read to us the Good Friday narrative from the Gospel of John. We will consider what Jesus teaches us with his movements and words, even as we notice how the ugly behaviors of others around him show us the possible effects of some of our own uglier behaviors.

I invite us to wonder about Jesus' likely (evident even) pain and about his potential suffering, inviting differentiation between the two. In his book, *The Five Invitations: Discovering What Death Can Teach Us About Living Fully*, which some members of People's Church read across the season of Lent, American Buddhist teacher and end of life specialist Frank Ostaseski teaches that suffering is caused by the combination of pain and resistance. Suffering is caused by the combination of pain and resistance. I would posit this evening that Jesus might teach us how to live through pain in ways that don't produce more suffering.

Ostaseski writes this: "***Suffering is exacerbated by avoidance. The body carries with it any undigested pain. Our attempts at self-protection cause us to live in a small, dark, cramped corner of our lives. We accept a limited perspective of the situation and a restricted view of ourselves. We cling to what is familiar simply in order to reassert control, thinking we can fend off what we fear will be intolerable. When we push back, hoping to get rid of a difficult experience, we are actually encapsulating it. In short, what we resist persists.***" Words from teacher Frank Ostaseski.

Jesus met pain directly – tremendous physical, mental and spiritual pain. He embodied knowledge that the Love that empowered is living and dying was stronger than his pain (and definitely stronger than any of the weapons others wielded to cause him pain). By not resisting tremendous pain, Jesus may have succumbed to the trap of suffering much less that our ancestors in faith have imagined.

Let us wonder now about what Jesus teaches us by his movements on that liminal night – at the threshold between life and death.

We heard Mindy read these words:

*“Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, ‘**Whom are you looking for?**’ They answered, ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ Jesus replied, ‘**I am he.**’ When Jesus said to them, ‘**I am he,**’ they stepped back and fell to the ground. Again he asked them, ‘Whom are you looking for?’ And they said, ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ Jesus answered, ‘**I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go.**’”*

Jesus was clear and confident in his identity and in his life work, even when others wished to intimidate him. I wonder this evening: are you clear and confident in your identity and your life work, even when others attempt to intimidate you?

We heard Ann read these words:

*“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?**’”*

We have all learned that, from places of fear and confusion, people will attack. Caiaphas the High Priest felt he needed to squash and silence one person in his community (Jesus) so that the movement Jesus had inspired wouldn't bring on the full, violent wrath of Rome. In the face of fearful, confusion-driven attacks, Jesus stood by his word.

I wonder this evening: do you stand by your word, even when people attack you from spaces of fear and confusion.

We heard Heather read these words in Jesus' initial response to Pilate, the occupying Roman empire's governor of that province of Judea:

"My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over..." Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, ***'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.'***

Jesus maintained that clarity of purpose – to testify to the truth of love and justice. I wonder this evening: do you consistently testify to God's truth of love and justice through the way you live?

We heard Hope read these words:

"Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and striking him on the face."

Jesus would not retaliate in word or action. He would not meet fear and hate with fear and hate. I wonder this evening: do you fully lean into God's love when the powers of fear and hate threaten to overtake you?

We heard Carol read these words:

"Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, 'Where are you from?' But Jesus gave him no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, 'Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?' Jesus answered him, 'You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above...'"

Jesus would not submit to corrupt, oppressive human rule. He simply would not play by their rules. Those who sought to silence him precisely submitted to the rule of corrupt, oppressive human behavior. I wonder this evening: when you find yourself surrounded by people getting ahead by pushing others down and pushing others away, do you remember to let the rule of humbly powerful love guide you?

We heard Jenny read these words:

“And carrying the cross by himself...”

Again, Jesus would not retaliate in word or action. He would not meet fear and hate with fear and hate. So I wonder again: Do you lean so fully into God’s love when the powers of fear and hate threaten to overtake you?

We heard Cheri read these words:

“When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home... After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished,... he said, ‘It is finished.’ Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.”

Jesus invited the love he had embodied to continue through those who had loved him. I wonder on this holy, solemn evening: when you most miss a loved one who has departed from this Earth, do you remember to carry their love forward?

I read these words about the movements of Joseph of Arimathea and of Nicodemus:

“They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.”

We know that Nicodemus had wondered aloud with Jesus (his beloved, trusted rabbi), 'how can I be born again?' Perhaps being present for Jesus' death was part of Nicodemus being born again.

May our experience this evening of being present for Jesus' death be part of our being born again on this Easter morning. May we follow Jesus as we move along the race of this one precious human life we have to live, because Love is counting on us. Amen.

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John 18:1 – 19:42