

Sermon for Good Friday
April 6, 2012
Trinity Church in Menlo Park
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When I was growing up, I attended Good Friday services faithfully every year. Of course, growing up in a clergy family, that is hardly surprising! Yet, I did not simply go to the Good Friday services because it was an obligation. I found Good Friday fascinating. Part of that fascination was the air of solemnity that filled the worship. Part of it was the procession down the street, with people carrying a large wooden cross for the rest of us to follow, that we had at least some of those years. Part of it was the blunted nail that each of us received, made to resemble the nails of Roman times, as a kind of sacramental reminder of what Good Friday represented. But mostly, my fascination about Good Friday revolved around two people: Jesus and Judas.

Every year, Good Friday became the occasion for me to form a mental picture of the crucified Jesus. Hearing the story of Jesus' death was a powerful experience, and each year, without fail, hearing that story would bring it alive in my mind. I used to imagine myself, standing near the cross, looking up at the face of the dying and dead Jesus. It impressed me, as a child, as being a horrible, horrible thing. It also impressed me as being an extremely important thing. An important thing that was connected to the story of Judas.

As much as I felt deeply the horrible truth of the death of Jesus, I nevertheless felt that Judas had gotten a bad wrap. I could not make sense of two things that seemed to be asserted as truths in the Good Friday story: that it was part of God's plan that Jesus should die on the cross and that Judas was responsible for the betrayal of Jesus that led to his death. I could not help thinking that if it were part of God's plan that Jesus should die – if the crucifixion were necessary for human salvation – then wasn't Judas simply helping God's plan to be realized? Wasn't Judas, rather than being the most evil disciple, in truth, then, the most helpful?

I experienced a very vivid recall of this childhood thought pattern just two or three years ago when there was a minor sensation caused in the Christian world by the release of the translations of something called the Gospel of Judas. A copy of the text in Coptic had been discovered in the 1970s in Egypt and had been poorly stored so that, when the text was finally brought out into the open in 2001, it had suffered considerable damage. It is not a complete manuscript, but enough of it has survived to be able to discern its basic message. What was so interesting to me about this text, and what made me remember my childhood fascination not only with the Good Friday Jesus but also with Judas, was that this text presented Judas in exactly the way I imagined him as a child. Rather than painting him, as the canonical Gospels of the New Testament do, as the evil betrayer of Jesus, this Gospel of Judas presents him as the most spiritually mature of the disciples, the only one who understood that Jesus had to be betrayed by someone if the whole plan were to move forward. The Gospel of Judas presents Judas as the only one Jesus can trust with the "holy" task of betrayal.

The text really does not give us any insight into the actual Jesus or the actual Judas, since it was undoubtedly composed long after the events that we remember in Holy Week took place. What it does give us, however, is insight into the Christian community out of which the Gospel of Judas came, the people among whom it was written. It shows us a community of believers who were thinking differently about the Good Friday story, and who felt moved, out of a reconsideration of that story, to reassess the person of Judas, and his role in Jesus' execution.

And I think the task that this ancient, anonymous Christian community undertook is a task which each of us has an obligation to undertake. The image of the crucified Jesus that is put before us on Good Friday should engage us in the same way it engaged my child mind. It should draw us into the story, and it should lead us into asking important questions about what's really going on. Because, quite frankly, the traditional party line about Good Friday has perhaps done more damage to the Christian faith than it has helped, and I think that is particularly true in our own day. And it does its damage because the traditional way of thinking about Good Friday leads us to a God whom I think most people have no interest in meeting.

The traditional, party line story about Good Friday has to do with that other "truth" that I couldn't reconcile as a child: that the death of Jesus was part of God's plan, a sacrifice required by God in order to bring about human salvation. The theological term for this is "substitutionary atonement", the idea that Jesus, who has done nothing to deserve to be killed, stands in for us, for all human beings, who do deserve to be killed because of our sinfulness. He stands in for us as a sacrifice, so the thinking goes, offered to God in our place. God, accepting the sacrifice of his own son, thus grants forgiveness to human beings. Or, at least, to those human beings who are followers of Jesus.

The problem with this substitutionary atonement approach is that it leads us to a God who is, for some mysterious reason, incapable of forgiving human beings in the absence of a human sacrifice. What sort of God are we dealing with, who can't forgive in the absence of a victim? What sort of God are we dealing with, who would demand the sacrifice of his own son, his own child, in order to agree to the salvation of humanity? Whatever sort of God this is, I can honestly say it's not a God in whom I have any interest whatsoever. For that God seems to me to be petty, vindictive, and cruel. These are not qualities we admire in other human beings, so why should we admire them in God?

And so for many people over the centuries, and certainly in our own time, this God of the substitutionary sacrifice has proved inadequate, and they have been moved to try to understand the Good Friday story in a different way, a way that honors the tragedy that lies at the heart of this day and that redeems God's part in the story, in much the same way that the Christian community I spoke of a moment ago sought to redeem Judas's part in the story.

For me, influenced by the theology of James Alison and the thought of Rene Girard, the meaningful key to the Good Friday story lies in recognizing the crucifixion of Jesus for what it is: a state-sponsored murder, committed NOT by Jewish people (though some leaders of the Jewish people were involved) but by Roman authorities. Christians, looking at the crucifixion in the rear view mirror of history, have surrounded that murder with powerful and sacred language, like the language we hear in our prayers today. We use words like passion, sacrifice, and crucifixion. This sacred language is important, and it can impact us powerfully. But in many respects, it also serves to insulate us and distance us from what is really happening in the story of Good Friday. In some important ways, it disguises what is really going on: a murder has been organized, arranged, and carried out. A man who did nothing to deserve death is made to die because the people around him are terrified and angry.

When we approach the death of Jesus as a murder committed by human beings rather than as a sacrifice required by God for some holy purpose, we encounter an important shift: rather than being led to ask questions about the nature of God, we are led to ask questions about the nature of our own humanity. We are forced to recognize that Jesus is not unique in being made the victim of frenzied crowds and terrified authorities, but is rather one in a long line of such victims that started before he appeared on the earth and continues, tragically, down to our own day. We are confronted with the terrible truth of human violence and our relationship with that violence.

For we live today surrounded by violence, and the victims that violence creates. Whether we are speaking of actual murder, as in the case of Trayvon Martin; or violence against women in the form of draconian and prejudiced public policy; or the verbal violence that has become commonplace in our public and political speech; whether we are talking about a gunman in Oakland mowing down innocent people at a university or whether we are talking about the thousands of victims killed and injured in wars far from our shores, we live in a violent world, members of a violent species. We have become so accustomed to the extent of our own violence, that it often no longer has the impact on us that it should. But the story of Good Friday can get into us in a way that these other stories, sadly, often do not. And we can begin to ask how we are like the crowds in that story: to what degree do we become complicit in the violence of our own time by our action or inaction, by our speech or by our silence?

There is a reason why Good Friday is not the central, most important day in the Christian tradition: it is because the murder of Jesus is an example of the many times human beings have put innocent people to death in the belief that they are serving some higher purpose. It is a powerful icon of the injustices that have claimed the lives of countless victims over human history and continue to do so today. It is not, in that sense, unique. But while the murder of Jesus is not unique, Jesus himself is. For the Christian community acclaims Jesus as Emmanuel, meaning "God with us." In Jesus, we believe that God entered into this messy, violent process of victimization NOT as the one who made Jesus a victim but as the victim himself. God became a victim of injustice. God, in Jesus, was murdered at the hands of human beings. And on Sunday,

we will celebrate what is the central, most important day in the Christian tradition: the return of God, in Christ, as the victim who is risen, breathing not vengeance and malice and more violence, but life and forgiveness.

I recognize now, from the vantage point of adulthood, that the little nail I received at each of those Good Friday services in my childhood came with a question: which end of the hammer is my life about? Is my life about driving that nail into others, making victims as I go along my way? Or is my life about removing that nail from others, so that they may be freed into new life?

And one thing has become abundantly clear: God is not the one who drove the nails into Jesus. God is the one who removed them.