

TO DIE FOR THE PEOPLE  
Isaiah 53:7-12, John 19:25b-30

The Cross is God's way of reminding the world how God takes evil seriously, to the point that He defeats it by renouncing its power and practices, and how, ultimately, His love prevails.

A thoughtful friend and I were talking at a social gathering sometime in the last decade – the 1990's. The years now seem so long ago. Our conversation took a turn towards the church, her Roman Catholic congregation and our mainline Protestant church. She invited my critique – where I thought we were falling down on the job. I didn't want to fall into the self-righteous, finger-pointing rants you hear so often on what I call "shout" radio. A more reasoned answer was in order. I said somewhere along the way we have forgotten the lessons of history, the lessons of human nature, and we forget to take sin and evil seriously!

I saw this same friend some years later, after the terrorist attack of 9-11-2001. We were catching up with one another (her husband had unfortunately died) when she reminded me of our previous conversation. How, in her mind, the events of that sunny Tuesday morning were a jolting reminder of the power of evil in this world. The deaths of over 3,000 people. Mass destruction and chaos. Broken families. Broken-hearted lives. A Roman Catholic church in New Jersey conducted over 30 funerals itself. One teacher of preaching I once heard declared that you shouldn't send people forth from the sanctuary so burdened with bad news that they feel worse than when they arrived. But the opposite is also true. You should never shield folks from the tragedies and terrors of existence that we soon fail to take sin and evil seriously. One extreme can lead to despair. The other to naivete. Becoming out of touch with the world God loves. The cross of Jesus is a reminder to take human sin and evil seriously.

It's unlikely that the window for consideration today would have appeared in a Protestant church in the previous century. It would raise the anti-Catholic ire of many as being too focused upon Jesus' death, perhaps distracting us from the power of His resurrection. Strangely enough, you step inside many Roman Catholic buildings today and you will find empty crosses, a shift that would surprise my Roman Catholic grandmother for sure. Her concern might be the opposite – forgetting Jesus' painful death. But, here it is, to remind us of Good Friday, of the painful passion and crucifixion of Jesus. This window reminds us that He did indeed die for you, for me, for the world around us. It was no sentimental, or pain free death, but the cruelest kind of all. He died despised. Rejected. Scorned by the world and people he loved. He died poor. Condemned as a common criminal. I often say that Easter would never be joyful if it weren't for Good Friday. Other windows in this sanctuary would be less powerful, less beautiful if we denied this picture of his crucifixion.

Notice the details. The colors surrounding Jesus are a dark mixture of browns, reds, purples and blues. The background is chaotic, confusing. The cross itself fades in and out of its surroundings. Unlike the light of the two previous windows in this series, there

is no bright stream from above. Jesus is all white – not the white of triumph or brightness but the white of ashes, of death. The pale white we would question if we saw one another in this color. His head is bowed and there is a look of resignation on His face. His arms are stretched painfully wide. His feet are stationed as though bolted to the cross. His posture is vulnerable. Extreme. Lifeless. It is as though we have just arrived when Jesus has uttered His last “It is finished!” The other two persons in the picture are Mary his mother and John the beloved disciple whom Jesus has instructed to take care of her. Mary’s posture is prayerful. Mournful. Aggrieved. Her face is indistinguishable as though she can no longer look at what is before her... the death of her child. The beloved disciple has placed his hands on her shoulders, a gesture of love and support. He looks on at Jesus. I don’t know if it is disbelief or powerlessness, or some combination of both which characterizes his face. Something in him has died along with the savior of the world. A dream. A vision. An honest yearning for Him to be the messiah everyone had hoped for!! In the background are two other crosses. The two criminals who were crucified with Jesus, perplexed that an innocent man would die willingly. In a state of surrender.

The question which leaps out at us from this crucifixion window is “why”? Why was it necessary or inevitable that the one we believe to be the son of God had to die, in such a cruel manner? The Roman Pontius Pilate himself declared he found no guilt in this man! But, why did the world abandon Him so readily, reject Him so thoroughly that He had to be nailed to a cross, disrespected by the crowds who had once received Him as king? Why did He have to die in such misery, such suffering? The question continues to present itself as the sunlight forms the maze in your eye, in your heart, in your life. Why did Jesus of Nazareth suffer and die, on a hill far away, abandoned and scorned? And why do we have this reminder in our sanctuary today? Theologians still debate the answer, the precise answer to this question. For what reason do we have this window?

Here is my answer. His death on the cross is God’s way of taking evil and sin seriously. His death is God’s way of saying “no” to violence, to evil, to sin, to despair. Saying “no” to any and all forces which lead us to hate and disrespect. Saying “no” to domination and rage. Saying “no” to injustice and persecution. Saying “no” to whatever separates us from God, one another, and ourselves, ultimately. This window reminds us how God would die for the people, because that was the only way to get through to us with the depth of His love.

In this story and on this cross God also says “Yes”. He says “Yes” to living a life of uncompromised integrity. He says “Yes” to the reality that there are many things worth dying for... like love, truth, and justice. He says “Yes”, obedience to God’s will is never in vain. Jesus on the cross says “Yes” it is far better to remain true to your calling than it is to cave in to your temptations. He says “Yes” to the cost of discipleship. He says “Yes” to the paradox – there is glory in dying for the people – because of the manner of His death, we do not need to be afraid when contemplating our own! The striking truth of Jesus’ crucifixion is how in dying for us... He teaches us how to live! In dying for the people, Jesus shows us the depth of his love – a love death did not then – nor cannot

today destroy. Yes, God takes sin and evil seriously. Otherwise – the lessons in our window of today are empty. Irrelevant!

Vincent Druding, an assistant editor of First Things, a Roman Catholic journal published in Washington, D.C. was in lower Manhattan on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September, 2001. He kept a journal of what he saw that fateful day and the days thereafter. He watched in horror as most of us did as the Twin Towers fell. He also watched in disbelief as people met their deaths. All he could do, he admitted, was make the sign of the cross. He described the people who survived, marching in groups of three or four toward Manhattan, some caked with dust, hardened on their skin. They looked like ghosts – extras perhaps from a horror film – quietly walking home! Their color not unlike the color of the Christ – crucified. Vincent heard a homily at the mass he attended the next morning. The priest implored the people of God not to yield to the pain and evil, but to overcome adversity with faith.

He returned daily to Ground Zero as a volunteer. Doing what needed to be done. Unfortunately, to compound the tragedy, some of our fallen citizens became looters and took advantage, breaking into abandoned apartments, even stealing from the stacks of relief supplies: jeans, shoes, sweatshirts and the like. The cross of Christ condemns such acts just as much as it does the acts of those who kill.

Two other observations left lasting impressions on the heart and mind of the volunteer. Written on a flier posted on the pillar of the Amex building were the bold letters: “RIP Father Mike.” Father Mike Judge – a Franciscan priest and chaplain of the Fire Department died while praying and administering last rites in the south tower! As Vincent saw this memorial, he was reminded that it was Sunday. He was exhausted physically, mentally, and most of all seriously wearied in spirit. Hoping to attend a memorial service in the afternoon at St. Patrick’s Cathedral – he realized he would be too late. A priest was there at Ground Zero amidst the volunteers, the crowd of relief workers, the grieving family members still searching for some sign of their lost loved ones. Vincent asked the good Father the schedule of the next mass. Unfortunately, there would not be another that Sunday. Then he said very deliberately, very carefully, “But, I can offer you the Holy Eucharist. Would you like that?” With days of chaos and fatigue weighing heavily – this priest – whose name remained unknown – placed his hand on Vincent’s head (like the beloved disciple placing his on Mary’s shoulder) said a blessing and placed a wafer in his mouth. Vincent’s eyes remained closed for a long time. He felt a pocket of peace in an otherwise chaotic, terrorized world. Afterwards – the good Father continued his walk amongst the wounded people of 9-11, dispensing his consolation as best he could. Sin and evil hurt. They hurt deeply.

The cross of Jesus Christ is God’s way of declaring “I understand”. I understand your fears. I understand your anxieties. I understand the evils you deplore. I understand the sins which you carry. I understand the human degradation which divides people one from another and fuels hate. I understand the death which threatens to extinguish the depth of my love. I understand the forces which have silenced the song in your heart. It is as though in this window you can hear through what your eyes tell you, the voice of

God himself declaring “I understand”. How do we know? His only son died for us! His only son lives for us! His only son will come again...for us!

One of the first hymns of the church that little Grace Callen will learn to sing is perhaps one of the most important. “Jesus loves me that I know – for the Bible tells me so, little ones to him belong, they are weak but He is strong!” How do we know these verses to be true? We know them by virtue of Christ’s willingness to die for the people. His willingness to love even if it costs Him his very life! If we forget to take sin and evil seriously – we may forget the depth to which God will go to overcome them! But, if we remember the cross on which Jesus died – we will be intimidated by nothing – and strong to defeat the sins and evils before us.

Does God take sin and evil seriously? Take another look at this profound window of Jesus on the cross. You tell me! So seriously that His only son would die to defeat them!

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Meditation offered Sunday, August 02, 2009  
Sermon Series on the Sanctuary Windows