



HOLLYWOOD
United Methodist Church
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MEETING JESUS- AGAIN:
Jesus, the sleeping disciples, and the cross

Sunday, March 14, 2010

Sermon by: Rev. Kathy Cooper-Ledesma

Scripture: Mark 14: 32-42

One of my favorite stories: One Sunday morning a mother was getting ready for church when she noticed her son wasn't up yet. She finally went in to wake him up. "Come on, get up...you'll miss church!" she said. "No, I want to sleep some more. I don't want to go!" came the reply from her son as he buried his head under the pillow. "Yes, you have to get up for church," the mother coaxed. "No, I am not going to church. And I'll give you two reasons. Number 1: nobody likes me and number 2: I don't like them."

The mother put her hands on her hips and replied indignantly, "Well you ARE going to church and I'll give you two reasons why you are going: number 1: you are 45 years old, and number 2: you are the pastor!"

Brothers and sisters, on this "spring forward" Sunday, in spite of our age, and for most of us not being the pastor, and our body's desire for more sleep, we are here together to worship God. Amen?

And on this fourth Sunday in Lent, our focus on Jesus – and meeting him in a new way – is getting more intense. One of the functions of Lent is to intentionally reflect on the life and death of Jesus, and what it means in our lives. This morning we are focusing on the cross, why Jesus faced it, and what theologians call "the atonement." After worship and communion Rev. Dave and I will be in Grant Hall for a sermon talk back, or discussion with you about your thoughts and understandings.

To set our conversation in context, our Gospel lesson is one read normally during Holy Week, but one that typically doesn't get a lot of attention. Maybe because it's one where we find the disciples sleeping. And we cringe because we know where the story is going. And maybe, if THEY had really understood that Jesus was facing imminent death they wouldn't have been so quick to slumber.

It's after the Last Supper, so we can surmise it's fairly late in the evening. Jesus has told them all that they will become deserters. Peter has vowed that he won't, and in response Jesus told him "before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." Jesus and the disciples have left the city for an area known as Gethsemane, about 100 yards out. He takes his three team leaders – Peter and James and John -- and goes into the garden to pray.

Mark tells us that Jesus is distressed and agitated, and the words of his prayer are familiar: on his knees, Jesus prays Abba, Papa, Father, can't you get me out of this? Can't you take this cup, meaning his impending torture and death – can't you take this away from me?

This is hard. We see so clearly the pain and anguish Jesus is facing. Like only a few other times in the Gospels, we see the fully human side of Jesus, and not both the fully human/fully divine Jesus. We see his human side, like we did when he wept over the death of Lazarus. Or got angry at the money changers in the temple. Or when he was hanging on the cross, how he told his beloved disciple to take care of his mother.

It's hard for us to see Jesus articulating his real terror and fear, his raw emotions – and then to see the disciples mess up so badly and show him so little support. But perhaps the most difficult thing for us is to try to answer his question: why can't this cup pass by? Why DID Jesus have to die on the cross, and why is this central to our faith?

Let me start by saying that Jesus himself modeled non-violence. At no time did he encourage violent revolution of the Roman empire or the religious establishment or anyone who had a different opinion from him. He was a revolutionary, to be sure; but Jesus never advocated for change through military force, nor for retaliation against evil. Instead Jesus sought to establish the reign of God through love – for all, even those who were his enemies. So, because Jesus advocated non-violence and did not raise up arms against the Roman empire, why did he endure such a violent and tragic death?¹

There have been entire LIBRARIES written in answer to that question. There are four main historical theological viewpoints that I'm going to review..... now, that might seem an invitation to nod off.....but see if you can identify which you grew up with, if any; and which most resonates with you now.

The first is known most popularly as the "ransom" theory of atonement, or rationale, for the cross. It was offered by St. Augustine several hundred years after Jesus' resurrection, and goes like this: Jesus died because in order to forgive humanity for its collective sins, God required a blood sacrifice of one who was completely holy, similar to the ones that were offered by our early Jewish ancestors who offered animal sacrifices to please God.

The second theory comes to us from St. Anselm, who lived around 1100 AD and who proposed what is called the “substitutionary atonement” theory, which influences many of our hymns and liturgies. It says: God will forgive us humans IF there is an appropriate substitution for our sins, one that is perfect – as Jesus’ was. Jesus willingly gave his life to substitute for sins of humanity – past, present and future. For me, my concerns with both the ransom and the substitutionary atonement theories is the notion that the God we worship is a God who would require such a sacrifice, a blood sacrifice, in order to provide us – you and me – with grace.

Let me offer a present day example, offered by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan:

If a firefighter enters a burning building to save a child and dies in the process, we say he sacrificed his life for her. Right? We say he was selfless, dedicated to his purpose of caring for the least among us. That he laid down his own life for hers.

But would we say:

--he needed to suffer so that the child might be saved?

--his death was a substitution for the child’s death because God wanted a sacrifice and he took her place?

We need to be careful not to conflate and confuse sacrifice, suffering and substitution.²

That brings us to....

The third theory, by Abelard, developed about the same time as Anselm, in the middle ages, is called the “moral influence” theory of atonement. It holds that God did not require a blood sacrifice; but rather Jesus chose to die and be resurrected as a demonstration of God’s profound love. When we who are sinners see what Jesus did out of his amazing love, we will naturally respond by turning towards God and living the Christian life.

While my own theology tends towards this moral influence theory, there’s something lacking in it. Taken alone, it’s too intellectual and lacking in encompassing the power of God’s great love made manifest in Jesus the Christ who died and was resurrected.

The fourth theory is one that has been around for centuries but has gained renewed attention in the past 40 years or so. It’s called *Christus Victor*, and it says Jesus’ primary purpose on earth was to make visible the reign of God. To make that happen, Jesus didn’t need to die as an atonement for human sins. But Jesus did die sacrificially for us, not as a requirement, but in a different way. Jesus’ death revealed the full forces of evil and the powers that work against God on this earth; powers that enslave us as humans and cause us to hurt one another. Jesus’ death and resurrection tells us that the powers and principalities of this earth, the forces of evil, aren’t the final word, because *Christus Victor* – Christ has the victory. Goodness is ultimately stronger than evil; the power of God’s love for us will never be defeated by death.³

Four different theories of why –the cross – and all of them have at least two things in common. One, they are all human constructs, based upon Scriptures and sacred texts and teachings, created so that our finite minds can comprehend the infinite power and love of our creator God. Remember Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13? *Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*

As United Methodists, John Wesley taught us to understand our faith through Scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Using those four prisms, think about which reflection on the cross most resonates with you, and can deepen your faith by its understanding. Second, in the Gospel of Mark you won't see a word about atonement. Or blood sacrifice. But here's what you WILL find. You will find Jesus intent on following the path that he set in motion when he came back into Jerusalem, the path that he knew would lead to Calvary. Not because it's what God wanted or required. Jesus knew that by fully and completely loving God and loving others, a life that established the reign of God on earth, a life that turned the social order on its head so that the last would be first and the first would be last; a life that said if you are poor or sick or lonely or outcast God loves you – come and follow me; have dinner with me. All that would be too much of a challenge to the authority of the Roman empire. And the consequence would be death on a cross.

*Mark Vitalis Hoffman writes: "the message is not how Jesus defeated death but how he refused to avoid it.....Jesus refused to fight inflicted pain by inflicting pain. He refused to overcome injustice with an easy, optimistic plan for progress. He refused to fight back against the shame poured out on him by a flashy display of power."*⁴

Instead, Jesus chose love. And that's the choice that Jesus asks us to make today, too. Do our lives reflect the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ for others? Are we committed to growing in our faith daily so that others will know we are Christians by our love?

Let me close by saying why choosing love, and growing in our own understandings of faith are more important now than ever. Last week Glen Beck told his audience that they should *scour their churches for any* mention of social justice or economic justice. He said that both terms are "code words" that were used by Nazis and Communists and that if a church preached either, one should "run as fast as you can!" While I'll have more to say in the coming weeks, let me share that my friend Jim Wallis, the founder of the Sojourners Community in Washington DC, went on national media this week and said that not only are Beck's claims false, they're at odds with the teachings of Jesus. Contrary to Beck's claims that social justice is a perversion of the gospel..... helping the poor is at the heart of the gospel.

Wallis said: "*The God of the Bible is the God of justice.... Poverty breaks the heart of God. And it breaks the heart of the church.We have different views on the role of government. Doesn't matter, But [social] justice is integral to the gospel....*"⁵

Brothers and sisters, unless we are rooted in our Christian faith and committed to growing in it, day by day, we might not realize that *social justice is actually code for Jesus*.

So this Lent, let us not fall asleep. Let us stay awake and vigilant, and proclaim that we are part of a social justice movement that is grounded in the love of Jesus Christ, whom we follow so that all of God's children might know they are loved.

Even if they are sleepy on time change Sunday.

Amen.

¹ J. Denny Weaver. *The Non-Violent Atonement*. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI: 2001, p. 13-16.

² Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week*. New York: HarperOne: 2006.

³ Weaver, pp. 13-16, 48,72.

⁴ Quoted by Kate Huey, *Weekly Seeds*,

<http://i.ucc.org/StretchYourMind/OpeningtheBible/WeeklySeeds/tabid/81/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/177/Into-Jerusalem-Mar-30Apr-5.aspx>

⁵ Posting by Jim Wallis on huffingtonpost.com, March 12, 2010,

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/03/12/rev-jim-wallis-glenn-beck_n_497715.html