

A Sermon by the Reverend Elizabeth Bonforte Gardner
Good Friday (C)
Friday, April 19, 2019

Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 | Psalm 22
Hebrews 10:16-25 | John 18:1-19; 42

Often we write our sermons well in advance.

Rarely does something happen that calls us to go back and make a revision or rewrite it.

A natural disaster...

Breaking news – good and bad.

A parish event...

But all in all, we are often set with what we have.

Last night was such a moment for me.

Elizabeth's sermon on what I call, The One Commandment: love one another as God loves you, caused me to see the events leading up to Good Friday in a new way.

Yes, tonight brings us all together at the foot of the cross to witness the suffering of Jesus, to see him draw his last breath. While most other church services beg us to understand and believe a lifetime and a lifestyle that seems so very far away, so unlike our everyday realities, so distant as to be almost incomprehensible,

Tonight is different.

There are no miracles.

There are no floods or tablets that come down from the mountains.

No one after being lame or blind their entire life is suddenly healed.

No one gets visited by an angel to tell them their baby is God's son.

Honestly, there is nothing tonight that stretches us to believe something that, if we were not Christians, would be unthinkable.

Why?

Because the events we remember tonight not only happened, in many ways happen over and over again every day.

A friend is betrayed.

A leader is sacrificed.

A son is killed.

And there is suffering.

So much suffering.

Humans have always suffered and caused suffering – in small and in very big ways.

In truth, what is unbelievable is our capacity to cause suffering.

We are masters at it.

Which is why, I think we see ourselves in tonight's story.

Let's take Judas.

After devoting years of his life to a political Messiah who was to overturn the Roman government, Judas had lost his patience.

You could tell he was on the edge a little when the costly perfume was "wasted" on Jesus in the story we heard two Sundays ago.

He felt Jesus just needed a little push.

Turning Jesus over to the High Priest would embarrass him.

Judas figured Jesus would be humiliated.

Maybe that is just what Jesus needed to stop being so passive and loving and accommodating and to get this movement going in a real way.

Judas knew the Jews can't kill anyone – only Pilate could do that – so turning him over to the chief priest would get the ball rolling.

Or what about Peter?

After promising to follow Jesus to the very end, Peter denied him to a servant – a middle school girl of all people – certainly not a threat to him.

In fact, when it looked like Jesus was going to be tried by the Roman authorities, ALL the disciples deserted him.

I think we would say, "with friends like these who needs enemies."

Or what about Caiaphas?

Joseph Caiaphas, the High Priest, was part of a ruling priestly family that had been in power for more than 40 years.

He and Roman government understood each other.

Caiaphas was beside himself.

He was sick of the crowds following Jesus.

They threatened his agreement with Rome to keep the Jews under control.

Caiaphas had a good thing going as Temple Priest – lots of money, lots of power, lots of prestige – he was not about to let Jesus ruin that for him.

If he could just get rid of Jesus, everything would go back to the way it was.

To Caiaphas, the ends justified the means.

And what about Pilate?

John's gospel makes it clear Pilate didn't want anything to do with this.

This wasn't his fight at all.

He kept going back and forth and back and forth between the accusers looking for peace.

How many times did Pilate tell them Jesus didn't do anything to deserve the death penalty?

Why, Pilate, wondered, wouldn't they just let him go?

Frankly, Pilate was just sick of having to deal with this.

The crowds were so riled up!

He just needed an answer.

Pilate did what he had to do to move on for heaven's sake.

Oh yeah, and there were the temple priests...

Jesus was the only thing they could agree on.

Usually they were busy pointing their righteous fingers at one another.

The Sadducees, the Pharisees, and others didn't agree on anything – except that Jesus was a problem for all of them.

I guess it is true that an enemy of your enemy makes them your friend.

Let's not forget the soldiers...

They humiliated him.

They tortured him.

But they were just following orders.

Or at least just doing what anyone would do in that situation right?

After all, boys will be boys.

They didn't need to take any personal responsibility for what they were doing to Jesus.

How on earth did all of this happen?

Which made me wonder, what if they did it out of love.

I wonder if Judas betrayed Jesus out of love... love for the movement.

Love for the Jewish nation.

Love for the future of Israel.

I wonder if Caiaphas wanted Jesus killed for love.

Love of power and money.

Love of authority and prestige.

Love of not losing a good thing... keeping the balance of power.

Maybe Pilate had Jesus crucified out of love.

Love of peace.

Love of expediency.

Love of just doing what had to be done.

We know that kind of love... don't we?

We can see ourselves in every last one of them, can't we?

We know betrayal.

We know power.

Expediency.

Authority.

Orthodoxy.

We know it all.

And, if we're honest, I imagine we can all remember a time when we protected some THING we love...

But the commandment says Love One Another.

Here's the good news...

The story doesn't end there.

For John's gospel, and indeed for us, this is Jesus's finest hour.

God's gift to us is that this is when we can put all of that behind us.

The times of betrayal, or denial, or judging, or condemning, or rejecting, or mocking, or torturing are over.

It is finished.

We don't have to be the person we may have been, or once was, or the person others expect us to be.

Tonight we stand together knowing we are so loved that a man and our God suffered death so that we might be reborn.

Tonight we see how in this suffering there is also hope.

Whatever brought us into this church tonight,

Whatever we've done in the name of worldly love,

Know that it can all stay right here...

And we can begin again living the kind of love that Jesus died for.