

Sermon: "I Thirst, I Quench"

Scripture: John 19

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Why? Why are we doing this? Why, week after week this Lent, are we staying in one place? Usually during Lent we move pretty swiftly from place to place in our journey from Ash Wednesday to Holy Week. We accompany Jesus on the road and his disciples in Galilee, his healings and teachings and the preparations he sets for his death in Jerusalem. But this Lent we started in one place, at the end of the story, and we've stopped and sheltered there in place... in front of the cross. We set our gaze upon Jesus on the cross and have been listening for the last 7 words he uttered before his death.

In his first three words his attention, even in the midst of his great suffering, was upon people around him – his executioners – "father forgive them", his fellow executed criminals – "you'll be with me in paradise", and the few disciples who remained with him - "Mother, behold thy son, behold thy mother".

Then he turns for the next two words more inward and He, who we say is fully human and fully divine, has this painful push and pull between those two truths of himself as the human wrestles with the divine, like Jacob wrestling with the angel at Peniel. Jesus looks to the heavens and cries "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" That was his fourth word that Judy beautifully elucidated last week, his very human cry in an agonizing moment of feeling abandoned by his God toward whom he had oriented his whole life. And we know through this moment that he truly knows our own psychological spiritual

pain of forsakenness that can wrack our lives. And then after this he says “I thirst”, an expression of physical pain so banal that it seems beneath our savior to express and out of keeping with the profound words that have come thus far. “I thirst.

Of course for anyone that has had a lot of physical pain in their lives, endured chronic pain or illnesses that have wracked the body and consumed the mind, you know it can be a profoundly isolating experience, physical pain, whether you have loving and caring people around you or not. But this too is drawn up into Christ’s presence. Once he is eventually resurrected and becomes hidden in a certain way beyond physical form and yet shot through all physical form, he becomes the loving ever present presence in the ever isolating experience of spiritual, psychological and physical struggle and suffering. He inhabits that space exactly where and when we can feel most isolated and alone, there he is, embracing us, as we open to him.

This is the harrowing Christian answer to the perennial human question of “where is God in all of this, in the presence of evil and pain?” It might not be a satisfying answer to some but it is a hugely comforting answer to others and for those who hold fast to Jesus it is the truth of the matter, the truth of matter, that God is with us in it. Not that God is causing our struggle or suffering towards some greater end or controlling it all for God’s purposes. Not that God is saving some from it and allowing others to suffer it. Not that God is punishing some and rewarding others... but that God is present in the suffering and in the fear and ultimately in our deaths with us. We have but to pause, open and notice.

So this is why we are we sheltering in place beneath the cross this Lent? Because it’s worth spending some time gazing upon and contemplating this

mysterious and scandalous claim of the Christian faith - that God suffered on the cross. It takes some time and some submersion into the mystery of this to catch a glimpse of the truth of what's being said, and that is that God was not in control here... And we need and want a God who is in control because if we know the God who is in control then we can be in control and that's what's at stake here, our effort to control.

But we witness in the cross of Jesus Christ, God so far out of control within the creation that God made, that God is blamed, tried, found guilty, tortured and executed by humanity as a criminal. It is a scandal of the highest order. A scandal so great that even God's church, the followers of Jesus for the most part don't know what to do with it and so they desperately try to give him back control, "here take the reigns, man, someone's gotta be in control or we're doomed!" And so they say here's what's happening "actually God takes his innocent son, punishes him for the sins that we deserve to be punished for and in that way saves all humankind." Yeah, that's it! God is back in the driver seat and in control of it all, phew!" But we see in the cross that it's not about control in fact it's finally and ultimately about the relinquishing of control for the sake of LOVE.

The Greek word for this act of God on the cross is kenosis, roughly translated as "self-emptying" or "self-relinquishing". And it's this word that best describes what's going on "on" the cross – if Jesus is the final and ultimate revelation of God, as many of us Christians claim him to be, then what we learn of God from sheltering in place beneath the cross for a time, should be that essential to God's nature, of what God is, is kenotic love; self-emptying, self-relinquishing

LOVE. Actually one could say there is no such thing as love, true love, pure love, that is not self-emptying and self-relinquishing.

Therefore in the cross, God relinquishes control, God self-restrains His won, Her own, Their own, power over, for the sake of accompanying love. It is horrible and it is beautiful. When we refer to Emmanuel at the coming of the Christ child at Christmastime, Emmanuel does not mean God OVER us nor God FOR us but what? God WITH us, God with us in love, God relinquishing all the power in the universe for the sake of love. SO, when we hear Jesus speak the 5th word from the cross “I Thirst”, there is so much packed into that statement. It means the One who created the waters of the earth and whose law of gravity draws the water in streams over beautiful waterfalls of grace and coaxes the water from clouds, the One who made great oceans and seas, and who gives life itself through the gift of water on this earth - and who knows where else in this universe – this is also the God who had poured himself out so profoundly in love for this creation that he became thirst itself. “I, thirst.”

If there was ever anyone who most all of us could agree was a Godly person it would be Mother Theresa, right? And the reason most all of us would call Mother Theresa a Godly person is not because she healed a lot of people, although she probably did many, nor that she managed a LOT of nurses and caretakers in an effective way to care for others, though she certainly did that too. Not because she garnered the respect of the most powerful people across the world nor that her name has become nearly synonymous with goodness and caretaking, though all of that’s true as well. But the reason most all of us would agree that she was a Godly person is because she gave her life to BE WITH those

who were suffering. Mother Theresa was a modern-day saint of kenotic love, self-emptying and self-relinquishing love, and THAT, we all know on some intuitive level, is who God is.

Did you know that Mother Theresa had a sign placed above the entrance to the chapels in all her missions? And do you know what the sign read?

“I thirst, I quench.”

It’s a paradox that the God who thirsts from the cross and accompanies us in our sickness and sorrow, our struggles and our sufferings, is the God who through that loving accompaniment quenches our deepest human thirst, our thirst for love.

God knows what you suffer, God knows how you thirst, God is with you in it out of love for you, rest there in God. Amen.