

Chapel Remarks
Daniel T. Roach, Jr.
April 3, 2015 - Good Friday

Whether we know it or not, we are all in the process of searching for the meaning of life, and we look everywhere to find it. Sometimes, our explorations involve little more than an obsession with our own or culturally imposed definitions of success and accomplishment, but at other times, we find ways to express, identify, and examine the essential meaning of our lives. We have to work to break into this world of enlightenment and epiphany and, unfortunately, this work usually involves the experience of suffering and despair.

Good Friday is a little like this: I do not look forward to entering the barren chapel, church, or cathedrals of my life to ponder and experience the sufferings, degradation, torture, and death of Jesus. I can always look for more enjoyable and comforting ways of experiencing a spring day, more effective ways of avoiding the elemental issues of life and death Good Friday demands of our attention. I am never comfortable joining the Good Friday reading as a member of the blood thirsty crowd that chants "Crucify him" in an increasingly urgent tone.

But these Good Friday experiences allow me to think about the sacrifice, the love, the language and imagery of this day, ones that have become so central to the thoughts, imagination, and creativity of not only theologians but also poets, novelists, essayists, and playwrights. We think about the word, the concept, and the experience of feeling forsaken as we hear Jesus, at the end of hours of suffering, cry out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and we begin to realize that the experience of losing everyone, everything in whom we have expected and experienced love and trust finds expression in those words, that question. We realize how human these words are, how they capture the pain, the cruelty, the despair of moments in our lives when it seems that even God has left our side, intentionally deserted us as if we were a broken pot or broken plate.

We all have our own private grief and trials and tribulations, but this year in the world has featured barbaric acts of violence, torture, and cruelty that compel our attention. In February, the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein spoke in Washington, DC at the Holocaust Museum, days after the commemoration of the liberation of Auschwitz, the concentration camp, where a million people were put to death. He surveyed the images of 2014-2015:

I scan the news and am revolted by what I read . . . Everyday, we are outraged by one piece of news after another! In fact we must be reaching a state of permanent disgust.

We see beheadings of “defenseless people,” the caging and public video burning of Jordanian pilot Lt. Muath al-Kaseasbeh. We see children loaded with explosives sent into public markets for detonation, the kidnaping and selling into slavery boarding school girls in Nigeria, and our hearts grieve for the chaos and depravity of the human spirit in the light of such atrocities. We recognize and lament the fates of those who seem forsaken, bereft of hope, friendship, and solidarity. Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein argues that certainty, fear, and absolutism threaten to overwhelm the forces of goodness in the world. He identified this 21st century voice of violence, terrorism, and moral emptiness:

I define myself narrowly as belonging to a nationality, or religion, or an ideology, a race or an ethnicity. I attach myself stubbornly to one or maybe two of these points of reference, sometimes led by a closed, narrow historical narrative, but not to a broader humanity and its laws because they are only a mirage, ridiculous really. Survival explains my bigotry, my chauvinism, and my inherent feelings of superiority.

What Jesus proposes and enacts on Good Friday is an audacious and divine and paradoxical approach to the problem of despair, fear, isolation, panic, fear, anxiety, and emptiness. By embracing and accepting and enduring a human expression of violence and hatred and intolerance, he reminds us both of our blindness and salvation. He honors and affirms and defends and asserts for the voice of all those injured, lacerated, mauled by human savagery, poverty, injustice, degradation. What a gift this suffering and forlorn Christ shares. What a revolutionary and disturbing and compelling message.

Our blindness emerges from our ready embrace of power, arrogance, certainty, and violence – our human tendency to believe we are justified in taking anyone down because of our ability to insist on our way, the way. This ideological certainty and arrogance allows us to unleash crime against humanity as monumental and devastating as the Holocaust, and it leads to an acceptance of disconnection, prejudice, and hatred directed against the other, whether the other be named Matthew Shepard, citizens of color in Selma, Alabama, 50 years ago, or a Nigerian school girl.

Consider the words of Representative John Lewis who described what it was like on the Pettus Bridge on March 7, 1965, as he marched for voting rights in Alabama:

We had to change that, so we sought to march. And we got to the top of the bridge. We saw a sea of blue – Alabama state troopers – and we continued to walk. And a man identified himself and said ‘I’m Major John Cloud of the Alabama state troopers. This is an unlawful march. It will not be allowed to continue. I give you three minutes to disperse and to return to your church.’ And, one of the young people walking with me, leading the march, a man by the name of Hosea Williams who was on the staff of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said: ‘Major, give us a moment to kneel and pray.’ And the Major said: ‘Troopers advance.’ And you saw these guys putting on their gas masks. They came toward us, beating us with nightsticks, trampling us with horses.

The salvation of Good Friday, on one level, comes on Sunday, as Easter celebrations begin here and around the Christian world. But the salvation of Good Friday emerges today, most powerfully associated with a divine confrontation and acceptance of our most feared and terrible antagonist, death.

Death is something we as humans rarely choose to confront. But on Good Friday, Jesus experiences and embraces the pain, the desolation, the abandonment of death in a public and personal and anguished way. He somehow transforms the moment in several powerful and illuminating ways. First, he does what all humans yearn to do – to look death in the face, acknowledge its pain and power to threaten us, our character, our values, our beliefs, and then he triumphs, not only by rising on Sunday but by expressing love and empathy and forgiveness and compassion to all those around him. As Mary Gordon argues in her book Reading Jesus, the narrative of Christ’s passion is linguistically and stylistically simple, elemental, and powerful.

She focuses on several crucial passages, among them, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”—**Matthew** 27:46. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”—**Luke** 23:34. “This day thou shalt be with me in paradise.”—**Luke** 23:43.

Together, these speeches depict a divine model of suffering, forgiveness, empathy, solidarity, and acceptance. Could one be in the cauldron of agony, desolation, and desertion and have the capacity for expressions of forgiveness, love, and acceptance? Apparently so – the depth of Jesus’ suffering causes

him to cry out in solidarity with all in humanity who suffer, who grieve, who starve, and this cry leads to an expression of reconciliation and pardon. Jesus forgives his tormentors, arguing somehow that they are merely human, subject to blindness, mistakes, and folly. He looks not for revenge but expresses forgiveness. He returns peace to expressions of hatred, grace to acts of savagery. Gordon writes: “He enacts for us the greatness of stepping back from what has been inflicted. The refusal of vengeance, of bitterness.”

When one of the men crucified beside him curses Jesus, the second defends him asserting that they as thieves deserve their fate, while Jesus did not. Jesus responds, “This day thou shalt be with me in paradise.” Jesus moves in Gordon’s words from isolation and desolation to “accompaniment.” She writes: “Part of Jesus’ gift to him is the gift of accompaniment. It is not too late.” This gift of salvation and forgiveness comes at the hour of Jesus’ death. It is the opposite of the condition of feeling forsaken. In fact, it asserts that those who are forsaken still have agency and power.

The simplicity and silence of a baby born in poverty in Bethlehem finds symmetry and coherence in an elemental anguished scene of suffering, acceptance, forgiveness, and grace. At Christmas we see a family, a baby, an expression of light and hope and reconciliation. On Good Friday we see Jesus embrace light and hope and reconciliation through the redemptive power of suffering. We need not avert our eyes, and distract ourselves with something more comforting. This is heroism, dignity, love, compassion, and grace. This is an expression of mercy.

We know what happens in the Christian Church on Sunday, and if you are a Christian, you will rejoice at the miracle and promise of the resurrection, somehow marveling at how quickly we move from despair to hope. It seems we have little to do, little responsibility other than showing up to Chapel twice in three days. But, maybe it is not that simple, either for Christians or for those who look upon this Christian narrative from a distance. Maybe the point is that goodness, mercy, love, and compassion emerge out of human solidarity, humility, and common suffering. Maybe in our suffering we are awakened to hear the cry of the baby, to feel the anguish of the poor, the invisible, the tortured, the pain of those facing death and embrace a new world view, a new responsibility of one another, whatever our religion may be. Maybe in our pain, we will appreciate the kindness, the small acts of grace that redeem us. Maybe we might remember what love, the love of Christ consists of – the willingness to give up our lives for the human family, and the growing good of the world. This is a painful, devastating, and illuminating day.

Hear the cries of those who find honor, recognition, hope, and grace in their human suffering, embraced in love by Jesus Christ. The sound will awaken you to follow a more abundant life. Remember, that when you are in pain and most desolate, you still have within you the power to forgive, to love, to save, and to redeem.

I still have no room in my vocabulary to speak or write of my father's death, but one image remains with me. But, at his moment of death and frailty and pain and disorientation, he met his doctors and especially his nurses with such grace, thanks, love, and honor – it was his way of making his death and suffering an expression of human love.

It is paradoxical, isn't it – we live most intensively, powerfully, and generously when we confront death, overcome it, deny its power, and assert the spirit that lives long after we die.