

## “THE WHOLE STORY”

Matthew 26: 36-27:66 April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017

You’ve been riveted to the television screen watching a movie that is now coming to an end. The movie is closing with a rather benign scene; but you are sobbing, because in the context of the story the scene is profoundly moving. And then someone enters the room, looks at the closing scene, then looks at you with a sideways glance that says, “Really, are you really crying?” And you snap back, “You have to see the whole movie; you have to know the WHOLE story.” Has this ever happened to you?

Sometimes I feel like we do that in the church. We’ve made an unfortunate habit of skipping important parts of the Gospel story. We go from waving palms and singing “Hosanna in the Highest” this Sunday to shouting “Alleluia, Christ IS RISEN!” next Sunday. But *Hosanna* and Alleluia are not the WHOLE Gospel Story. There is darkness in this story. There is pain in this story. And, apparently, we would rather avoid pain. Our sanctuaries are full this Sunday and packed next Sunday. But the percentage of church goers who will also attend another service this week on Thursday or Friday, where typically the painful parts of our story come to life, is very small. We have turned the symbol representing that painful part of our story into stylish accessories crafted from silver and gold, worn by pop culture icons as fashion statements.

Perhaps that is why the church has returned to calling this Palm/Passion Sunday and not just Palm Sunday, in an attempt to get us to face the painful part of our story: the suffering of Jesus, the death on a cross.

It’s all so bloody and messy. I don’t know about you but I tend to avoid those kind of movies or books where I know that they will be gory. Most of us

would rather cover our eyes and not peek out again until the stone has been rolled away, and we would certainly rather avoid this whole business of the cross of Jesus and that it somehow is relevant to our own lives! Paul's exhortation to the Philippians to "have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus"—the mind which led him to "humble himself and become obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross"—ARE YOU KIDDING ME? It offends us on so many levels we can't even begin to count them!!

Everyone knows that the most basic principle of human motivation is symbolized by the "carrot and the stick," the pain pleasure principle. We humans are drawn toward "carrots," those things that give us pleasure; and we steer clear of "sticks," those things that cause us pain. We are all about the avoidance of pain!

Just think about how our economy would be affected if we took out all the products and services out there that help us avoid pain! Do you think it would be far off to say our economy might even come close to collapsing? We take pain-killers for body aches and pains. Some of us may be prone even to numbing our own emotional pain with one substance or another. In case we might suffer hunger pangs, we have fast food available on every corner—or we have a special shelf in the pantry with an ample supply of snacks. Most new parents I know center their lives around this one goal: keeping their children out of harm's way—away from germs that will make them sick, adults who might exploit them, and peers that might lead them down the wrong path. It seems to be a given that we don't want to suffer pain, and we definitely don't want those we love to suffer pain.

And isn't that right? Isn't that natural? In fact, isn't that good? Isn't that what Jesus' ministry was all about? Making people's pain go away?

Why on earth would Paul be suggesting that we be willing to humble our-

selves to the point of death? It is fair to consider Paul's words in Philippians a remake of Jesus' invitation to "Come, follow me. Deny yourself. Take up your cross."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor in Germany who was executed for his resistance to Nazism, also did a remake on these words when he insisted that the call to Christian life is that Christ invites a person "come and die."

We rarely hear that today, do we? We hear things like "Come get your best life now" and "Come follow me and see how your American dreams can come true." We are bombarded with messages that sell God as the ultimate painkiller.

And even those of us who just might fancy ourselves above such "pop" proclamations of faith betray our own internalized versions of such a gospel when we declare our "blessings" to be our nice homes, happy families, successful businesses or our most recent escape from impending tragedy. Our children have picked up on this version of Christian faith that avoids the whole story. Back in 2005, Dr. Christian Smith and his fellow researchers with the National Study of Youth and Religion at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, interviewed more than 3000 American adolescents. They found that the faith of most adolescents in Christian denomination churches could best be described as "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." Sounds kinda scary, doesn't it? Well, it can be summed up with beliefs like these: God is watching over us from a distance, we should be good, and the most important thing is for me to feel good."

Well, Jesus did want to make people feel good, didn't he?

Let's think for a moment together on the chapters of Matthew's Gospel that lead us to today's Palm/Passion liturgies. Jesus has been all about ridding people's lives of pain and suffering: He healed not only the bodies of people with diseases

and deformities and demons; you remember the leper...the centurion's son... Peter's mother-in-law...those controlled by destructive powers...the blind...the crippled? Jesus freed them all of their suffering. He also took away their pain of alienation by restoring them to community and to lives of service and meaning. He actually taught that it was right to break the Jewish law in order to alleviate human suffering. It was okay to disobey the Sabbath commandment in order to meet a human need! And he healed a man with a withered hand to prove the point --on the Sabbath---and we have to wonder if the man's withered heart wasn't restored as well. When the people got hungry, Jesus had compassion on them and he fed them. When the storm was threatening to overtake the disciples, Jesus calmed it and made them safe and protected them.

It seems like the whole point of following Jesus has been about alleviating pain...and then Jesus begins to talk about taking on pain willingly..."humbling himself to the point of death." Then Paul dares to suggest that we have this same mind in us. How do we make sense of Paul's paraphrase of Jesus' invitation to "Come and die?" It doesn't seem to line up with the mission of Jesus to relieve people's pain.

So which is it? Is the GOOD NEWS about helping alleviate pain and suffering or is it an invitation to enter into pain and suffering? The One we follow reached out with compassion to touch and heal all kinds of human pain; on the other hand, the most basic symbol of our faith is a cross—and we are aware, even if we avoid admitting it, that Jesus insisted that those who want to follow him... must take up their own cross.

Does God want to relieve our suffering and increase our joy or does God want us to enter into pain willingly and walk the way of death??

Sometimes we hear people say, “Well, that’s just his cross to bear,” and they are referring to all kinds of suffering...everything from putting up with an obnoxious relative to dealing with a debilitating disease. The assumption is that THE CROSS is a symbol for any kind of suffering and pain. But the CROSS is not a symbol of generalized suffering. It was a symbol of execution, of tortuous execution.

For Jesus to say back in his time “Take up your cross” could be like comparing in our time “take up your lethal injection—and follow me.” So...what in the world does that mean? Perhaps it is an invitation to discover that good for which you are willing to die...that GOOD for which you would lay down your life...perhaps TAKING UP YOUR CROSS, or as Paul puts it, “Being obedient to the point of death” is about doing God’s will as we discern it...regardless of the COSTS.

Perhaps “having the same mind that was in Christ Jesus” is the mind that Jesus demonstrated as he struggled in the garden of Gethsemane to figure out what it meant to align his human will with his divine will. That’s what Jesus’ suffering on the cross was; he was so intent on doing God’s good will that he endured the pain of the cross. The cross is the suffering that leads to new life, like the labor of childbirth. Every mother has to make the decision that she is willing to suffer and possibly die in order to bring the life that she is carrying into the world.

Likewise, to say “this is my cross to bear” is to identify that good for which you are willing to suffer and die—if not ACTUALLY, certainly METAPHORICALLY—to endure any pain in order to bring to life *that GOOD which must be born in and through YOU.*

When Jesus tells the disciples of his impending suffering---“And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord!’ This

must never happen to you.” -- Peter’s plea for Jesus not to suffer in that way—to avoid the cross—was like pleading with a woman not to suffer for the birth of her child. But every woman who has given birth knows that the pain is totally worth it when she sees the new life she has given to the world.

That’s when Jesus says to Peter, “You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” The mind of Christ was not to seek suffering for suffering’s sake...it was not to accept injustice as a passive bystander...it was not to turn a blind eye to victims of disaster, disease, or oppression...it was to take up the suffering that would lead to NEW LIFE.

You see, the point of our lives is NOT TO AVOID PAIN...neither is it to endure pain for pain’s sake. THE POINT OF OUR LIVES IS TO FOLLOW CHRIST...to do the will of God...to CHOOSE LIFE AND JUSTICE AND GOODNESS... and to bear whatever suffering comes in order to bring the Christ-in-us TO LIFE in the world.

“...the Christ-in-us”—I wonder what that means for you and me?!?!  
*Let us pray.* Gracious and Life-giving God, grant us the grace to discern between the suffering in our lives and in the world which Christ is calling us to relieve and the suffering which Christ is calling us to enter, believing that on the other side there will be NEW LIFE and great joy! Amen!

(Adapted from “The Whole Story,”  
by The Rev. Pam Driesell, PCUSA)