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St. Mary's SF
Good Friday
4.14.17**

This evening we gather at the cross of Christ. Jesus' death has been recorded for us in cruel detail, in John's gospel as well as the other three gospels. We hear of the mocking of the soldiers, the burden of Jesus bearing the weight of the cross through the City streets of Jerusalem, and we can picture the agonizing pain he must have felt as the nails were being driven through his flesh, and the aching thirst that overtook Jesus, as well as the feeling of desolation and loneliness that he confronted as death approached.

What does the death of Christ on the cross mean for us really? How does Jesus' death have the power to change our lives? to calm our fears? remove our sins? deliver us from death? to somehow bring us security and a sense of safety?

In one sense the cross has no power at all. The cross cannot, indeed does not force us to love, believe or trust in God. But what it does show us, beyond a shadow of a doubt, is the total vulnerability, the complete openness, the selflessness of God's love for us as seen in what Bishop Marc Andrus refers to as the "radiant life" of Jesus and then what became his transformative death.

In a paradoxical way the power of the cross is that it had no power in a conventional sense. It's not like the "hard power" used by President Trump when he ordered last week's missile attack on a Syrian military base nor is it like the "soft power" employed by President Obama in ordering sanctions against North Korea. Oddly enough, it is the very lack of any sort of conventional power that makes the death of Jesus upon the cross so very persuasive.

The cross was a human invention, not God's. The theological term for Jesus' death on the cross is "atonement" If you separate that word into its parts it becomes AT-One-Ment. Over the centuries since the crucifixion there have been several interpretations presented by Christians trying to explain what Jesus "died for our sins" actually means.

Many scriptures and Jewish temple metaphors of blood sacrifice, and perfect offerings, or debts that have to be paid to God, give the impression that God is a vengeful, angry God who had somehow to be placated by sinful human beings. Someone had to pay for our sins and the reasoning goes that Jesus was the one God sent to pay the price because all of humanity was stained by sin and Jesus was not. While many accept this notion of an angry God who demanded a blood sacrifice from his own son, there are other theories as to what Jesus' life and death mean.

Thirteenth century Franciscan theologian, John Duns Scotus said that Jesus was not "solving any problems by coming to earth and dying. Jesus wasn't changing God's mind about us, rather, Jesus was changing our minds about God. ..."God did not need Jesus to die on the cross to decide to love humanity. Jesus is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15) who came forward in a moment of time so we could look upon 'the One we had pierced' (John 19:37) and see God's unconditional love for us, in spite of our failings." (Richard Rohr, "A Nonviolent Atonement" 10.12.16)

Why is the cross important? There is no question that Jesus was crucified by a corrupt, violent, political and religious system that was tolerated and supported by the general population of the Holy Land. Yet Jesus' words from the cross were about forgiveness, not violent retribution. Jesus' death says to us that God suffers with us in this conflicted and inhospitable world of ours.

The message of the cross is that God is far better than the violence often promoted or at least tolerated by religious institutions and practices, be they called Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, or by whatever name.

The cross changes our lives when we accept the truth that “God does not love us because we are good; God loves us because God is good.” “God does not love us because we are good; God loves us because God is good.” (Richard Rohr). Nothing we do or don’t do will ever decrease or increase God’s eternal love for us and all of creation.

The message of the cross is that Jesus, a healer mortally wounded, an innocent victim of human evil, or if you prefer, sin, loves humanity in general, and each one of us in particular. We do not have to earn God’s love or forgiveness. And it is this love that gives us the courage to make a new start, to cast aside old behaviors, attitudes and actions that we collectively refer to as “sins.” It is this love that saves us from a dying in despair and it is this love that shepherds us into the next life at the time of our biological death.

And so we gather on this night to draw our minds and hearts to Jesus’ death on the cross, a death that gives us a glimpse of the eternal love of God. As we gather tonight and focus upon this cross, we also recall that this is an instrument of human torture that continues in so many forms even today, be it saran gas in Syria, state sectioned executions in prisons in this country and elsewhere, killings by terrorists and gang members or just murders committed in domestic disputes...you know the list goes on and on and on.

On this cross, God in Jesus embraces the pain of innocent suffering and the agony of all who have fallen victim to failed human love.

We gather on this night to give thanks for Jesus’ act of total self-giving love, a love that heals our wounds and give us hope, a truth upon which we can build the foundation of our lives.

We gather at this cross to accept Jesus’ love and forgiveness offered to us and all humanity. This cross, a symbol of pain and hatred, is transformed into an everlasting message of God’s love. That is why we refer to this day as “Good Friday.”