

Squamish United Church
Rev. Karen Millard
Good Friday

March 25, 2016

The Face of Love

...
on his shoulders a cross was placed,
Which he accepted with grace.
Under the weight of it
He stumbled and fell
All the way to Calvary.
On top of a garbage dump,
He was nailed to a cross of wood
And left to die,
While soldiers gambled,
Critics joked,
Religious leaders smiled with satisfaction
And his mother watched and waited

Why are we here today on this horrific Friday in the story of our faith?
Would it not be much easier to refresh the palms that are strewn upon the floor and
celebrate once again with a parade?
Nick and I have been reflected many times over the last week about the fact that
people want to go from a party to a party.
Perhaps this Good Friday story is too real? Yes it is dark but it speaks to the reality
of the challenge of life. Life is not one big party. AT least that is not my experience.
Life has its parties but there is no question that it has its fair share of crosses and
depths as well.
So Why would we want to engage in this dark day?
Why enter into such a gruesome story?
I do so with both trepidation and a heavy heart
I do so with a mixture of theologies and contexts
And yet it is this day speaks to the core of our faith, and its intersection with our
lives.
This day is not about how Jesus died but why he died.

These palm branches that lay before us, remind us of “Hosanna’s” shouted Just a
few days ago. A call for salvation, an anti-establishment protest. Less than a week
ago we remembered Jesus’ brave entry into Jerusalem; his courageous entry into

the place where he stared into a jumble of eyes that offered honour and injustice, wonder and mockery, love and hatred, life and death array. He knew he was risking it all when he entered Jerusalem that day. He knew he was going against everything the authorities would desire. But he longed for a different world.

Soon after his triumphant entrance into Jerusalem Jesus confronted the corruption in the temple. He challenged the arrogance and exclusion of the authorities as they attempted to trip him up with questions of paying taxes and following laws.

One author wrote “Whenever I enter into the story of Lent and observe the path that Jesus walked to the cross, I am struck by his quiet equanimity in the midst of a whirling storm of threats and danger. Once the horrendous events of his last days were triggered, he took each moment with resolute openness of heart and apparent fearlessness. “Fear not” he had taught his disciples, and he was showing them in those last days how that imperative is lived out. Physically, emotionally, and spiritually he was threatened from all sides.”

As the palms stopped waving Jesus faced an interrogation of Pharisees, Sadducees and Romans challenging his version of the truth. And so, he reminded religious leaders of their scriptures and the commandment to love God and neighbour. But this truth telling only agitated them more. They demanded to know how this carpenter dare to tell them to love? How he dare to tell them that what the poor choose to give is as good as the abundant wealth from which they offer? How dare he tell them that those they have judged are worthy of more? How dare he?

How dare he show such compassion? A compassion that led him to experience a betrayal of the deepest kind. A betrayal so disturbing it’s hard to believe. For in the face of love a close companion sells Jesus for a little wealth.

“There was much cause for fear. Standing in front of the religious authorities, he was charged with the most scandalous crimes, and his spiritual community utterly condemned him. Standing in front of the secular authorities, he faced the full force of their cruel power and was humiliated, physically beaten, and forced to carry his own cross to his tortuous death. His community of friends was rendered powerless by their fear, and most abandoned him to face his ordeal alone.

As the scriptures show, Jesus was fully aware that these terrible events would lead to his annihilation, yet the gospel story does not speak of him having fear. Instead, there is quiet dignity in his response. Grounded in his truth, he speaks loving words

of forgiveness; he reaches out with quiet assurance; and in the fullness of his vulnerable humanity, surrenders to whatever arises in each harsh moment.”

On this day every year my heart breaks open with the psalmist and Christ as we cry why? Why God have you forsaken him?

Why does he not defend himself?

Even the baffled Pilate does not understand.

Where are you from? He asks.

What is the truth? He inquires

He does not speak and so in silence we look into his eyes and see truth.

We see in those dark, strained loving eyes “I am truth” “I am love beyond all measure”

“I AM” the truth and the love you abandon. I am the truth and love you were created for. And yet because I am calls us to a love and truth our world does not know the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and dressed him in a purple robe. They mocked him, spit on him and struck his face. And then they set an innocent Jesus on trial.

The decision had already been made for unconditional love brings to the untrusting great fear. To look in the face of Jesus brought crisis to humankind because it called for them to be different than they were, it called for them to be transformed.

And so as the mock trial ends even the authors of our scriptures seem to find it hard to bear the horror of the story; for we are left only to imagine the depth of pain and suffering. As they take Jesus; and he carries his cross until he can carry it no more, and then a stranger journeys with him to the place of the skull where they crucify him.

This death and suffering like all death and suffering confronts us. And yet this death confronts me in a way that causes my stomach to churn. For this death stares me straight in the face and says this is what we do with love.

This is what we do when today we choose to oppress, and ridicule, and set apart those who are not worthy of our company. We say they are not worthy of God, or Christ, we say they are not worthy of love, we say they are worthy of condemnation or even death. It is not God who calls them unworthy. It is not Jesus who says some should not be accepted. He died to prove love.

So as you look this day into the face of the crucified Christ know that he is love, and know that he understands your pain, your places of rejection, your innocence, your guilt and your grief and he loves you anyway.

God's Friday calls us to grieve injustice; our own, and that of others. This day reminds us that our God has known the darkest of times in the deepest of ways and God grieves with us.

Perhaps today in this place where the likelihood of us dying for our faith is small we are called to bear witness. To walk the journey like Simon of Cyrene.

“Scripture tells us that Simon had come in from the country. He's probably come into Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover festival, like the thousands of other pilgrims. We don't know if he was a follower of Jesus; he simply appears in the story as a face in the crowd. Perhaps he's just drawn to the noise and the tumult, pressing forward to get a better look at what's happening, the way we might slow down at an accident scene today.”

But when he is grabbed by a soldier he suddenly becomes more than an observer. He is in it. He is now literally a follower of Jesus, and for a short while he carries the cross of Christ.

This day may remind us that in the ways people continue to suffer under the pain of oppression, of violence, of slavery, that Jesus continues to be crucified. Are we willing to be pulled from the crowd; to have the cross thrust upon us, if only for a little while. Though we may not be in danger of dying, following Jesus brings the danger of feeling the sorrow and the pain of a world groaning in birth pangs, or perhaps in death throes. We may not be in danger of dying, but we are in danger of having our hearts broken, of receiving upon our very souls the wounds of the world.

Perhaps more often than we know, we are presented with times of being seized from the crowd, and the cross is thrust upon us. As we accompany those who are sick until death. As we walk with the broken and lost. As we advocate for the homeless, the addicted and the mentally ill in our community. As we stand up against the injustice of women raped and abused. As we comfort the family whose loved one has just been murdered. As we welcome and support the refugee who has been imprisoned and tortured. As we bear witness to a world dying of AIDS, of tribal slaughter, of environmental toxins, of child prostitution, of terrorism, of human trafficking. As we look unflinchingly at the world and refuse to pretend it is different than it is, to ignore it and walk on, but rather, be willing to carry Jesus' cross for a little while. Like Simon of Cyrene, we are not in danger of dying, but if we truly follow Jesus, we are in danger of living, of living fully into his passion.”

Isaiah had written: “By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future?” How could great love, live such death? How does it conquer sin and injustice today? Is this the end? If it is what is the future of love?

We are the future. We now have the opportunity to be the truth and love. We pray for the courage to accompany Jesus today, to bear part of his burdens, in the many ways and places his body continues to be crucified. And we pray for the grace and faithfulness to not hide our faces from his pain and suffering, reflected in the world today, but to embrace them and carry them, if only for a time. Don't dismiss it, although that is the easiest thing to do. Don't turn from the face of love in unbelief. Live love so that, that piece of work which Jesus finished in his death we will accomplish in your life.