

The Only Way
John 18:28-19:37
Good Friday, April 6, 2012

I.

Today we continue our journey through Lent. We began on Ash Wednesday by reaffirming that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. And we confessed a long list of our shortcomings, which included pride, hypocrisy, impatience, and our self-indulgent ways.

That was a sobering experience at the time. Six weeks later we stand before the cross on an even more solemn and mournful occasion as we remember that Jesus, the innocent shepherd, died to save us, his sinful sheep.

But, not so fast. Why should we be downcast or sorrowful because of something that has been called the Good News? After all, the Bible tells us that Christ's death washed away our sins. And on that final day when we all must account for the content of our lives, Jesus will stand beside us and tell God, "It's OK, they're with me."

So, should we be here with heavy hearts? After all, Christ died for us, and Sunday we celebrate that he was raised for us. The dust of our mortality has given way to the sure and certain hope of forgiveness and eternal life when we accept Jesus in that way. That should be great for us.

But it was not so great for Jesus. We remember his agony in the garden before his arrest, and recoil at the duplicity of his betrayal. We deplore the treachery of those who judged him. And the horror of his crucifixion is beyond the limits of human language.

So is that why we are serious and somber today? Is it because we feel bad for Jesus? I'm sure we think that no person should endure what he went through. Perhaps it's the injustice of it all. An innocent man was executed and we, in our compassion, are here to pay homage.

II.

Well, certainly we are here to remember Jesus' sacrifice. But there's a lot more to it. Please do not think that we come because we are being sympathetic toward Jesus or considerate of what he went through. Those ideas do not apply today.

Instead, we are here because we recognize what could have been the consequences of our own imperfections and unrighteousness. We're here because we do not deserve what God through Jesus Christ did for us. And we stand, and kneel, in thankful wonderment at the gift of our lives inherent in his death.

That's because prior to the events of Good Friday, humanity was irretrievably and irrevocably separated from God. Humanity had betrayed God's trust, and people had no hope for anything other than the mostly harsh realities of their earthly lives, and the bitter and final end that came with death.

But God changed all that. Through the sacrifice of his divine Son we can be reconciled to God even though we never could achieve that on our own merits. Because Jesus died we can live with God in eternity even though we have no rights or claims to such a wonderful destiny.

And so we come in humility, and adoration, and thanksgiving. We're here with awesome reverence as we try to fathom the unimaginable scope of God's love for us. The Son of God gave his life for us even though we were and are unworthy. Everything changed because of Good Friday. Everything.

III.

Let's examine why that's the case. Was there not another way? Why didn't God just forgive everybody without Jesus even being involved? Couldn't he simply have forgiven Adam and Eve? Couldn't he have forgiven the disobedient Israelites. And surely he could have forgiven us, couldn't he?

Or why couldn't God have treated us like we treat our own children. When our kids do something wrong we discipline them. We say, "Let that be a lesson to you," and then go forward without dwelling on it. Couldn't God just have disciplined us and then let us start over with a clean slate?

There's a country western song recorded by Vince Gill, among others, where a fellow pleads with his angry girl friend to give him just one more last chance.

But that idea doesn't work with God. That's because God, who is holy and righteous, could not continue to forever give us just one more last chance. And we, who are not holy and righteous, forever would be asking for that one more last chance. It would be a never-ending cycle.

So something had to happen. There were two likely possibilities. Either God could have turned away from us and separated himself from us for eternity, or in his grace he could have chosen to restore our relationship with him; the relationship he intended from the beginning.

But there was a problem with the notion that God simply could decide to continue his relationship with us. Because God is perfect he could not forever accept sin among those he loves. And because we are imperfect, we cannot completely eliminate our sin. Certainly we can repent time and again, but our sins always would be abominations before God's holiness.

So, three things had to happen for humanity to be made right with God. First, our sin had to disappear; not just set aside, and we are powerless to accomplish that. It had to be done for us.

Second, our repentance had to be divinely guaranteed; not just humanly promised. Our track record of promises has been flawed from the beginning. The guarantee had to have credibility with God. We could not offer that.

And third, the sins of future generations had to be absolved in advance, for eternity. Otherwise, our separation from God would exist for eternity. Obviously, we could not do anything on our own to bring about future salvation.

This is where Jesus enters the picture. It is why Jesus was born, and it's why he died. God never intended that Jesus would live to a ripe old age here on earth. God did not plan for Jesus to dwell among us for a while, and then retire to a house along the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus' birth and death solved our dilemma with God. Because Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, born of a human mother and the divine Holy Spirit, he could offer himself to fulfill humanity's need for forgiveness while also meeting the requirements of God's own righteousness.

Through his humanity he assumed upon himself the sins of humanity for all time. Our sins became his sins, and he stood in our place to take God's wrath for us. And through his divinity his sacrifice forever created a perpetual reservoir of reconciliation in which we can be cleansed in God's eyes if by faith we accept what Jesus did. Jesus was and is the only way.

IV.

So, as we gather to worship on this Good Friday, we can begin to grasp the full extent of what God our Father did for us through Jesus Christ on the cross. Even though we walked away

from God's plans for us and served our own selfish needs, and still do so, God was willing to allow his Son to redeem us for all time.

And so, for us and for all humanity, Christ's work on the cross has created a New Covenant that people didn't have two thousand years ago. Now we can know the truth, and if we believe and have faith we can look forward to the blessings of eternity with God. *Amen.*