

Good Friday, 2009
Sermon by the Rev'd A. Robert Hirschfeld
Grace Church, Amherst
April 10, 2009
Text: John 18:1-19:42

There is something in us that wants Good Friday to be other than what it is. There is something that wants Good Friday to satisfy our senses, to even be beautiful. We want this liturgy to help us make sense out of the nonsensical and to move us a level that feels right. We want to experience a kind of aesthetic satisfaction. And we want a gratifying return on the investment of time, preparation, and prayer we put into this day. I used to hang out with church people who sometimes gathered for coffee and the compare sermons and music of Holy Week. "I like to go to Trinity Copley Square for the preaching on Good Friday, but nothing beats Church of the Advent for an Easter Vigil. And don't miss Emmanuel Newbury Street for those Bach Cantatas on Easter Morning. You don't know Pentecost until you've been to..." How often do we come to a worship service the same way we go to the coffee shop across the street, or to just about anywhere else, for our own special and favorite blend, strong but not too acidic. That's how the world works, that's how the economy would have it.

But when we hear the Passion according to John, we come across a frightening possibility. What if Good Friday, what if the passion and crucifixion of Jesus signal the end of the economy that we all have subscribed to. What if Jesus' last word, "It is finished", means the end of the economy, the system that even the church has bought into. What if tonight we can say that Good Friday is good because we no longer have to feel we need to pay for love or attention or expect to get anything back in return and then suffer the disappointment or resentment when we don't? What if tonight is the end of the choking calculus that says: "I will give you this so that I can get this in return? I don't know about you, but that sounds just both terrifyingly upending and wonderfully liberating to me."

Jesus refuses to play by the rules of consumerism. He shows us what it means to be a child of God, utterly loved by God, not because of anything

that God will do for him, or what we do for Jesus, or what Jesus will do for us, because it's all pure gift.

Jesus frustrates and blocks every deal that the world wants to strike with him, because the only deal he cuts is utterly, radically free of charge. Let's look at the deals Jesus refuses to make with us:

Judas wants a military zealot, someone who will enlist the crowds and lead a coup that will expell the roman legions out by force. Judas would follow Jessu to the gates of hell if Jesus would take up arms against his enemies. What does Jesus do? Hang out with collaborators, tax collectors. He even heals the injuries of one of the temple security guards who comes after him in the garden.

Annas and Caiaphus would like someone to support the temple establishment, the main-line denomination, if you will. One has the sense that if Jesus could market his signs, his miracles, to the prophet of the Temple establishment, those in charge, the counterparts to our bishops and deans and rectors, would be delighted to have him on their staff. What does Jesus do? Makes a whip of cords and warns that the temple will be destroyed, and that he could build a better one in three days. The least he can do is be respectful and submissive when being questioned by Annas the high priest's father in law. And if isn't, then let him be struck on the face.

Pilate just wants to keep the status quo, keep the balance between the religious authorities Judea, the crowds, and the armies of his outpost in Jerusalem intact. He wants a way out of his tight spot between a rock and a hard place. If Jesus could just cooperate and give him a straight answer, Pilate would let him go.

Why can't he play by the rules of the Commodity God. "why do you refuse to speak to me? Don't you know I'm the one the power here? The power to crucify or release you? I will get you out of this if you get me out of this. Let's make a deal here." And Jesus' response seems to say, "You have your economy, the rules of the world, but I'm choosing to fashion another, divine economy. And I will do it my giving my life, demanding nothing in return. It's that free."

Meanwhile, Pilate, locked in the calculus of this world must be panicking. OK. Fine. "Let's figure out another trade: Jesus for Barabas? Barabas for Jesus?" The Market God makes its will known. By the way, how often do we refer to the Market as though it were a god? What did the market do today? What does the market say about this. How will the market respond to this event, or that statement? In the market of Jerusalem on Good Friday, the market works the same as it does today: human lives being exchanged with the ease of trading baseball cards. Barabbas gets to be a free agent. Jesus nailed to a tree.

The transaction mode gets one final little sordid expression when the centurion gamble for the seamless woven cloak. Winner take all.

But Jesus doesn't live by the rules of I'll give you this, if you give me that, winner take all. His power, his way, is not of this world. He just IS and the nature of Christ's being is giving, expending, without loss, without exhaustion, even in death. Jesus is. He is. His constant refrain throughout the Gospel of John is not "I will give you this if you give me that," but simply, powerfully, I AM. And all of his I AM statements use images that are not based on reciprocity or return for services rendered. I AM the Good Shepherd, explicitly not the hired hand. I'm not in this for the pay. I am the True Vine that just pours life and water into the grapes without expecting anything in return but to live in god, in humanity, in all and for all. I Am the Gate of the Sheepfold, willing to lie in the breach of the fold so that the wolf and the thieves will have to get through me first before the sheep. I am the Bread which comes down from heaven, that multiplies infinitely, that is not fed itself, but provides nourishment for the life of the whole world. I AM who AM who Was who Will be. BE Still and know Jesus, the one who saves by giving, by loving, and in love, gives, with no punishment if you don't love him back. Its I AM WHO AM, appearing in the burning bush that was not consumed, that called a reluctant studdering shepherd Moses to confront the power of Pharoah. It is I AM Who AM who stuns the detachment of soldiers and temple security guards, causing them to fall backward on the ground, and whose death on the cross is not the end, but the means of deepest freedom and the most radiant glory.

Much has been written and thought about the transactional dynamic of the Cross. One thought is that Jesus gives his life on the cross so that God may

give it back to him, but with the value added of eternity. Jesus is the first investment banker, showing us how to do the same, if only we would take the risk.

But here's the radical, scandalous, stumbling-block truth. It's a crock. That's not how this deal goes down. The fact is that, according to John's gospel, because of this day, all humanity as already, even now, got the reward in your account. There is nothing you will do, that will make God love you, give you, anymore, or any less that what God shows you he is doing today, and for all eternity on this cross. No need to fear opening up your statement...you already have eternal life in Christ. The only part you have to do is accept and enjoy it. Jesus gave up his life on the cross. He gave it. He isn't expecting a darn thing in return, he just hopes to high heaven that you'll accept it, embrace it, be embraced, enfolded and washed, even drowned, in it. If we could, all of our days would be lived in joyful thanksgiving, reckless generosity, peacemaking, for we have already died, and are already poor, we are already hungry thirsty. There is nothing we have lost that hasn't already been restored to us in infinite measure. What news for this age! What wonderful news for our distressed economy!

As the wonderful hymn says:

For the love of God is broader than the measure of the mind;
and the heart of the eternal is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more faithful,
we should take him at his word;
and our life would be thanksgiving
for the goodness of the Lord.

And yet, because we don't take God at Gospel truth, we continue to fall into the mode of the evil one who said, you take this, and god will give you that. Maybe we can see the little transaction in the Garden of Eden as the insinuation of the Transaction mode of salvation: You do this for me and I'll get you that: Eat the fruit and what a bargain awaits you! How much of our behavior reflects that economics. We give our money to the church expecting something in return: a better, more newfangled programs, more extensive outreach with less overhead. I, for my part will be happy to bring communion to the lonely sick woman in the nursing, but I sure hope she's

awake, so I can get credit. Meanwhile, while we're occupied in such calculations, the schools in Springfield will graduate only 50% of its seniors, the homeless seek shelter, the isolated need a community that loves, and the gap between rich and poor widens, the planet is in peril, and the sick remain without adequate health care, are even in our Commonwealth. The world, chasing after things that do not satisfy, still hungers. But Good Friday is good because we now know it doesn't have to be this way.

Oh Jesus, by your cross and passion O Lord, may we see that you have given us all we need, all we could ever want, which is your love. May your cross set us free from seeing your life and love as a limited resource to be hoarded and guarded. Show us again how your life flows into us, and through us into the world you have created and more wonderfully desire to restore with our own hearts and hands. Help us to take you at your word so that our lives will be thanksgiving for the goodness of You, our Savior.