

sermon-3/29/09 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Dying As Transformation”
John 12:20-33
By Jim Patten

We are at the fifth Sunday in Lent. The gospel lesson today sets the stage for Good Friday. This text gives us a glimpse into how John understood the meaning of the cross. Scholars point out John does not seem to care much for the concept known as “substitutionary atonement.” That understanding of the cross says that God needs to judge sin. When Jesus was crucified he was accepting the punishment we deserve by dying for us on the cross.

That does not seem to be John’s perspective on the cross. There is not much in John about Jesus dying for our sins. Instead, John sees the cross as Jesus’ glorification, his enthronement, as it were. He is lifted up on the cross and his true identity is revealed.

Commentators point out how John wants to reverse the normal expectations in his day. Instead of Jesus being judged by the world leading to his crucifixion, Jesus’ death on the cross judges the world. By the world, John is not referring to the created order. Jesus does not judge all humanity on the cross. This use of the term world refers to that part of the world that opposes God. It is led by the “ruler of the world” or Satan. Instead of Jesus being defeated by Satan on the cross, Jesus defeats Satan and all that Satan stands for.

And finally, how people perceive the cross is reversed. Normally the cross was an ugly scene making people want to turn away. It terrified people. It caused them to run in fear rather than confront injustice and all that opposed God. Now Jesus’ crucifixion reveals the depths of God’s love for humanity. The cross no longer repels people. They are drawn to it. Those are big reversals indeed.

Interestingly, the gospel of John does not talk about Jesus performing exorcisms. Jesus does not expel demons that have been tormenting people. Those stories are in the other gospels. For John, the cross was the great cosmic exorcism. Commentators talk about how Jesus takes on the world’s cruelty, violence, and hatred and defeats, or exorcizes them on the cross. All those negative things are the result of Satan, or evil inhabiting God’s beloved creation. They are exorcized by Jesus in his death and resurrection.

That is the Good News we celebrate on Good Friday and Easter. Violence, cruelty, and hatred are not ultimately going to triumph on this earth. They may appear to be so much stronger than peacemakers, kindness and love. They may intimidate us and cause us fear, but they are not the strongest reality in God’s commonwealth. God’s love, expressed in Jesus’ life and death, will finally triumph over evil.

There is, however, tough news mixed in with the Good News. If we call ourselves disciples of Jesus, we are to be about the same business he was in. We are to be about exorcizing cruelty, violence, and hatred in our lives and in the world at large.

That, of course, is not easy, nor is it safe. We learn in the passage right before our text, that Lazarus' life is in danger. Because he is a follower of Jesus and his resuscitation from death has caused others to be interested in Jesus, he, too, must be put to death like Jesus. It is seldom safe to follow Jesus in the fullest sense of that word.

How can we muster the courage and the stamina to do all the work following the crucified one requires? Jesus says we must hate our life. At first glance that just does not sound right. Is Jesus promoting the ultimate anti-self-esteem message? Are we truly to hate ourselves?

No, Jesus is not asking us to hate ourselves in the sense of detesting our very beings. Scholars tell us that when we are called to hate, we are being called to choose something other than ourselves and our own well-being as our top priority in life. "Those who love their life" is referring to those who put themselves and their comfort above all else. Jesus is calling us to rearrange our priorities.

That, of course, is not easy. One does not move from a selfish perspective to one that is willing to make sacrifices for others, and maybe even sacrifice oneself in the ultimate sense of that word, without some things dying in us.

That is what Jesus is getting at in his image of the seed needing to die in order for it to produce fruit. It is a nice image. Seeds are just individual entities until they are planted in the ground. Once in the ground they can crack open and then produce something far larger and more important for the world than just being a little seed.

This text is urging us to ponder what little deaths must happen in us for us to produce fruit that will nourish the world. What must die in us for new life or transformation to take place in us personally and also to benefit the whole community?

Walter Wink, a New Testament scholar, likes to talk about the myths we hold dear that lead to cruelty, violence, and oppose God's desires. One that he addresses is the myth of "redemptive violence."

So many of us think the only way to confront those who threaten us is to kill them. Certainly our country's foreign policy these past several years, and even longer than that, if truth be told, has bought into this myth. While I don't think our leaders are trying to glorify violence, at least not all the time, it is seen as the only way to preserve our freedom and way of life. It is redemptive in that sense. It redeems our freedom at the cost of taking the lives of our enemies, and, sadly, even taking the lives of civilians, including children.

When one is a follower of the crucified one, one can't help but see that Jesus rejected this way of defeating his enemies. The only suffering and death Jesus saw as redemptive was his own.

I am not naïve enough to say that we do not need a military, or that all acts of violence are wrong and un-Christian. But, we can't help but be a whole lot more hesitant in resorting to violence to protect ourselves, or to inflict vengeance on those who have hurt us, if we are to truly call ourselves followers of Jesus. What that means in every situation is hard to say. I do know we must, as a country, find better ways of confronting terrorism or we will sink to our enemy's level! The myth of redemptive violence must die in us, in other words.

On a more personal level, this notion of letting things die in us in order for our lives to be transformed, has all kinds of possibilities. I don't know what the issues are for you. They could be consumerism, or the need to be in control all the time, or the inability to forgive. Maybe the issue is more general. Perhaps fear or anger are what needs to die in you.

Lent is a time to think about what we need to let go of, what little deaths we need to go through in order to better follow Jesus. At best that is very challenging. It can even be frightening to ponder. But I also know when we do the hard work of letting go, of undergoing those little deaths, God will redeem that effort. Some of our best old hymns affirm that. I'd like to close by quoting a couple of verses from a great hymn, "How Firm a Foundation."

“When through the deep waters I call thee to go
The rivers of sorrow shall not over flow;
For I will be near thee, thy troubles to bless,
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.”

The author of this hymn is suggesting that God will sanctify our deepest distress. That stops me in my tracks. If we trust that, our lives will be transformed. Dare we trust God that much? Amen