

## Good Friday 2017 Sermon

*John 18:1-19:42; Philippians 2:5-11*

Last night I mentioned how Maundy Thursday and Good Friday always seem to disorient me, eliciting in me a jumble of thoughts, emotions, fears, and uncertainties, making it hard to preach on these two days. What does one say? It's just too much, and too hard to put into words. Which is why in our *liturgies* for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday we rely so much on actions and symbols to speak in ways words cannot, and to draw us into participating in Jesus' passion, death, and ultimately, his resurrection.

I have had to tell my overwhelmed self on Good Friday that the Paschal Mystery – the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ – is **never** going to be *explained* – certainly not in a sermon, certainly not by me. But then, it was never **meant** to be *explained*; it was meant to transform our lives. And that is an ongoing, lifelong process.

I also shared with you last night a new perspective on Holy Week (new for me) which I became aware of this year: the realization that Jesus' birth and death are inextricably linked. At the Last Supper, Jesus takes a loaf of bread, symbolizing his bodily life, and before he breaks it, he gives thanks (Luke 22:19) – gives thanks for his birth into bodily life, which he deeply recognizes as gift. And it is this very gift of his bodily life that he breaks and gives to his disciples – both *sacramentally* at the Last Supper, and *physically* on the cross.

In last night's Gospel, St. John began his story of the Last Supper by saying about Jesus, "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them *to the end*." Now, we have seen throughout Lent how John loves words with multiple layers of meaning, and in his telling of the Passion story, he uses the same root word at the beginning and at the end. For when John says, at the beginning of the Passion story, "he loved them *to the end*," that Greek word we translate "end," *telos*, carries the multiple meanings of "fulfillment," "accomplishment," "completely," "goal," "wholly," "continually." And John uses that **same** root word at the **end** of his Passion story, when Jesus, with his dying breath, says: "It is completed." *Telos*. Accomplished. Fulfilled. Made whole. There is a perfect symmetry between the beginning and ending of John's story of Jesus' Passion.

And what I hinted at last night and am suggesting tonight is that there is a *similar* symmetry in Jesus' conception and birth at the **beginning** of his *bodily* life, and his death at the **end** of his *bodily* life. For they both involve Christ **emptying** himself. Christ **emptying** himself. In the very first verse of John's Gospel, we read: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." And then John tells us, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us." (1:14) The pre-existent, divine and eternal Word empties himself into human flesh. St. Paul wrote of this emptying of the Eternal Word in his letter to the

Philippians, in those very verses which we read this past Sunday to begin Holy Week. Paul writes:

“Have this mind in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to cling to,  
but emptied himself,  
...being born in human likeness.”

This is Christ’s *first* self-emptying – at his conception and human birth. But Paul continues:

“And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death--  
even death on a cross.” (*Philippians 2:5-11*)

This is Christ’s **second** self-emptying: his pouring out his bodily life on the cross. “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end,” poured out his earthly life fully in love, emptied himself, to completion and fulfillment and wholeness.

In that one poetic passage from Philippians Paul reveals the symmetry between Christ’s birth and his death – a symmetry defined by Christ’s self-emptying.

And here’s the thing: Paul tells us that **we** should have this *same* self-emptying mind *in us* that was in Christ Jesus! As I said last night, we are not meant to be *spectators* of Jesus’ suffering and death. Our Maundy Thursday and Good Friday liturgies are meant to draw us into these very events of Jesus’ passion, becoming active participants in Christ’s death and resurrection – what St. Augustine called the great “Paschal mystery,” the Easter mystery. And we do so not simply by entering into the **liturgies** of this week; we do so by living lives that are transformed by “having the same mind in us that was in Christ Jesus” – a mind, an attitude, an orientation to life that is motivated by a loving self-emptying for the sake of the other.

In a devotional email this morning from the Center for Action and Contemplation, theologian, teacher, and Episcopal priest Cynthia Bourgeault argues eloquently that **this** is the characteristic of Christianity that sets it apart from any other religion: self-emptying, which she says is an action of the heart. “In Jesus,” Dr. Bourgeault writes, “everything hangs together around a single center of gravity, and we need to know what this center is before we can sense the subtle and cohesive power of his path.

“What name might we give to this center? The apostle Paul suggests the word *kenosis*. In Greek the verb *kenosein* means ‘to let go,’ or ‘to empty oneself,’ and this is the word Paul chooses [in this passage from Philippians] to describe ‘the mind of Christ.’

“Paul recognizes that Jesus had only one ‘operational mode.’ Everything he did, he did by self-emptying. He emptied himself and descended into human form. And he emptied himself still further, ‘even unto death on the cross.’ In every life circumstance, Jesus always responded with the same motion of self-emptying...”

That’s what we saw last night when he washed his disciples’ feet. That’s what we see today as he pours out his life on the cross.

And he calls us to do the same: having the same mind that was in Christ, we are to empty ourselves out of love for the other. Last night, after his self-emptying act of putting aside his outer garment, putting on a slave’s towel, and washing his disciples’ feet, he tells us to do the same – to wash one another’s feet in self-emptying love. And today, he empties his bodily life on the cross, and he asks us to do the same – to take up our cross (Luke 9:23) and follow him: “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. ...” (Luke 9:24)

“Have this mind in you that was in Christ Jesus, who... emptied himself.”

AMEN