

Good Friday 2022 Sermon

John 18:1-19:42

We read in the Gospels that at the end of the Last Supper, Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn, after which they went to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus would pray, be betrayed, and be arrested.

I wonder what hymn they sang after that last meal they shared together.

Last night, at our Maundy Thursday service, we sang a hymn which speaks of the unfathomable love of Jesus, who poured out his life on a cross out of love for you, me, and all Creation. The hymn we sang last night begins by asking a question: “What wondrous love is this?” The author of the hymn is amazed at the incomprehensible love, the wondrous love, Jesus manifested utterly on the cross.

Another Holy Week hymn, from the 17th-Century, starts off in a similar way: “My song is love unknown...” the hymn begins. The kind of love Jesus showed on the cross was hitherto unknown; and the author of the hymn sings of this mysterious, unfathomable, heretofore unknown, love.

In St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians (2:5-11), we find what some scholars believe was an early Christian hymn that pre-dated Paul’s writings. That hymn begins: “Let the same mind be 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 be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross.” That hymn in Paul’s letter has been called “the kenosis hymn,” after the Greek word for “emptying.”

Commenting on that kenosis hymn, Episcopal priest Cynthia Bourgeault notes that, “in this beautiful hymn, Paul recognizes that Jesus had only one ‘operational mode.’ Everything he did, he did by self-emptying... In whatever life circumstance, Jesus always responded with the same motion of self-emptying.”¹ From his conception and birth, throughout his ministry, until his death on a cross, Jesus was all about self-emptying.

Do you remember that occasion when Jesus was in a crowd of people and a woman who had been suffering from bleeding for 12 years touched his robe? In Mark’s Gospel, we read that the very moment the woman touched his robe, Jesus was “immediately aware that power had gone out from him.” *The Message* translation reads that Jesus “felt energy discharging from him.” (Mark 25:5-30) Was this not Jesus *emptying* himself into that woman, pouring out his life-energy for the sake of another? And I have to believe that if energy was discharged from Jesus in *this* healing, then energy must have been discharged from him in every **one** of his healings – and miracles and teachings! He was *forever* pouring life-

energy into others; and the cross was but his final, complete self-emptying. “It is finished,” Jesus says in his last words from the cross. As St. John wrote in last night’s Gospel, “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” (John 13:1-17)

Commenting on that same kenosis hymn from Paul’s letter, Biblical scholar N.T. Wright notes: “[Christ’s] decision to become human and to go all the way along the road ... yes, all the way to the cross—this decision was not a decision to *stop* being divine. It was a decision about *what it really meant to be divine*... As you look at the incarnate son of God dying on the cross the most powerful thought you should think is: this is the true meaning of who God is. He is the God of self-giving love. ... Yes, says Paul; and **that’s** ‘the mind of Christ’...”² (unquote)

My friends, trying to preach on Good Friday is, in some ways, a fool’s errand. There is so much meaning in this day that eludes words; so much mystery that can never be comprehended. So, is there *anything* at all that we can say about the cross today that might help transform our minds into the mind of Christ, our lives into the Life of Christ? I think there is.

As N.T. Wright wrote, “As you look at the incarnate son of God dying on the cross, the most powerful thought you should think is: this is the true meaning of who God is. He is the God of self-giving love.”² Simply gazing on the cross and *knowing* that **this** is the nature of God can make all the difference in how we approach life and interact with one another and with the world. The universe was created in, is sustained by, and is moving toward, **self-giving, forgiving** love; therefore, we can risk being open to **all** of it. Our mistakes do not condemn us. We need not fear Reality, for the God who is Reality Itself, the God revealed by the crucified Jesus, is a God of wondrous, self-emptying, love.

And we can surrender our lives to this God because God has surrendered to us. Franciscan sister Ilia Delio writes, “The surrender of God in the person of Jesus Christ is the great mystery of God. God does not hold back and wait until we get things right; rather, God loves us *where* we are and *as* we are. In the Incarnation, divine love has found us and has surrendered to us. It has handed itself over to us to do as we please.

“What do we do with this tremendous gift of divine love so freely given to us? Some of us are blind to this love, so we ignore it. Others do not believe that God surrenders—completely in love with us—and therefore reject it. Still others fear that a God of self-giving love could be weak, and so they question the divine love. But for those who breathe in the Spirit of God, the surrender of God in love is the greatest act...” [1] [Ilia Delio, *Ten Evenings with God* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 2008), 79–80.]

Here's what I imagine: in emptying himself completely on the cross, Jesus releases a mysterious power of cosmic proportion that begins to radiate out from him as he breathes out his last breath.

Throughout John's Gospel, we have repeatedly heard that Jesus' "**hour** has not yet come." (John 2:4; 7:6, 8; 7:30, 8:20) But then, shortly after his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus says: "The hour *has* come... Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (John 12:23-24. See also John 12:23, 27; 13:1; 16:21; 17:1))

What mysterious power is it that allows a seed that dies to come alive again and bear much fruit? It can seem miraculous even to those who may know all about the biology and biochemistry of seed germination.

What mysterious power is it that brings Jesus from death to life, and continues to spread resurrected life through self-emptying love, even today? It defies analysis; but the Church, down through the centuries, has called it "the Paschal Mystery." Dr. Bourgeault, in all her articulate brilliance, can only call it "divine alchemy".⁴ It is what Aslan the Lion in C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* calls "a deeper magic which goes back before the dawn of time." When that deeper magic is engaged, Aslan explains, a mysterious power is released which makes "Death itself start working backwards."⁵

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Whatever that "deeper magic," that divine alchemy, that Paschal Mystery is, I am convinced that it emanates from a divine self-emptying; for **this** is the very nature and power of God. Jesus' cross *reveals* this deep magic most clearly. In "emptying himself... even unto death on a cross," as Paul's hymn states, Jesus enters fully into the mystery of dying-to-live, revealing to us the Way that we, too, can, and must, follow. In that Paschal Mystery of death turning to life, Jesus becomes the catalyst enabling God's alchemy to do its work in us, and empowering us to sing God's song.

AMEN

1 Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind – a New Perspective on Christ and His Message*, Kindle Version, Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2008 p. 64

2 N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, Philippians

3 for an engaging treatment of this principle, see Rob Bell, *Love Wins*, Chapter 5, "Dying to Live"

4 Bourgeault, *ibid.* pp. 72, 74

5 C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, copyright 1950, C.S. Lewis Pte. Ltd.