

## Sermon for March 24, 2016, Maundy Thursday – “WHY?”

We're close, now, to the end. For the last five weeks we've traced Jesus steps toward the cross and today (tonight), we approach the sobering (even brutal) conclusion to Luke's account of our Lord's Passion. And I have to admit that each year as we again approach this point, the climax and conclusion of Jesus' earthly life, I feel one simple, pathetic cry welling up inside of me: Why? Perhaps you recognize this question. It's the distraught cry we utter when we are confused by our circumstances, outraged by a sense of injustice, or simply feel utterly out of control...

Why did the cancer have to come back?

Why did this have to happen to me?

Why did she have to die?

Why is my family struggling so?

Why has God forsaken me?

**Why?**

It's the question that helps us articulate our deep desire to find meaning in meaningless events. To understand events beyond our control, and maybe not feel quite so overwhelmed by them. It's the question that sticks in my craw this time every year, why?

**Why** must Jesus die like this?

**Why** must it end this way?

**Why** the mockery and abuse?

**Why** the whip and nails and the crown of thorns and cross?

**Why**, in the end, such an agonizing and shameful death?

**Why?**

**Why? Why? Why?**

Faithful Christians throughout the Church's long history have struggled to address just this question. We call the various answers "atonement theories." Emphasizing one part of the Biblical witness or another, these theories attempt to address the "why" question by describing Christ's death in a number of ways. As a substitution for our own. As Christ satisfying God's requirement for holiness. As Christ paying the penalty for sin. The example Christ's death sets for us. Even of the victory Christ wins over death and the devil. And yet while each of these theories highlights some aspect of the truth of our Lord's death, none of them ultimately satisfies completely. Our questions persist. We may take some comfort in knowing that we're not alone in our confusion, or in questioning what this is all about. Throughout the Gospels Jesus regularly predicts His passion, and just as regularly, His disciples fail to get it. They misinterpret Him. They misunderstand Him. Finally reject His predictions as simply too awful to believe. And so when the unimaginable (though not entirely unexpected) happens, when Jesus is arrested, judged, and crucified the disciples are also left reeling, also left asking: "Why?"

I've wondered if maybe this confusion isn't really the disciples' fault, or (truth be told) ours. The reason I say this is because while Jesus may've predicted His passion, He never went into great detail to explain its meaning. That is, He never got around to explaining **why**. But, and here's the thing, Jesus does address another maybe even a more important question.. Who? For whom did Jesus die? The answer lies in Jesus' words during the Last Supper, we heard them earlier. Jesus had taken bread, He then broke it and said: "This is My body, which is broken for you..." Jesus then took the cup, gave it to his disciples and said: "Drink from this all of you, this is My blood of the new covenant which is poured out for you..."

Did you catch them? Those last two words? Every time we celebrate communion we hear them. They are what we refer to as the “words of institution...” The words “for you.” My body – My blood - My life – for you! For those disciples, including Judas who betrays Him, Peter who denies Him, and the rest who desert Him. And if for them, then for us as well! I believe that realizing this, that this is done for us, can and should make all the difference.

So while Jesus doesn't answer the question “why?” He does answer the deeper question of “for whom?” and does so in a definitive way! What do I mean? Well, what I mean is this, while Jesus may not fully explain the meaning of His death, while He may not answer the question of **why** He died, He leaves absolutely no doubt whatsoever as to its significance... That it is **for us**. Above and beyond all our confusion, all the questions, we hear in these two words the shocking, unimaginable, and utterly unexpected promise that everything Christ suffers **for us**. All the humiliation, all the shame, all the pain, all the fear is **for us**! Jesus goes through that entire ordeal **for us**, for you and for me. And He'd have died for any one of us if we were the only person alive. What's more, we know because Luke makes it abundantly (even painfully) clear that Jesus gives Himself over to death **willingly**. At the end of his Passion narrative Luke goes on to write these words: **“Then Jesus, called out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit.’ “When He had said this, He breathed His last.”** Do you see what I mean? Do you see what's happening here? Jesus' life isn't ripped away in a horrible accident, or senseless tragedy. No one takes it from Him. No, what happens is that He commends His Spirit to the Father. He places it into His Father's hands for safe keeping. He gives His life of His own accord.

As the resurrected Christ will ask the two disciples He meets on the road to Emmaus, **“Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter His glory?”** Yes, He did, for us! The hard part of the story of Jesus' Passion story is that we may never be able to answer that persistent and perplexing question of **“why.”** But we can answer what might be the far more important question, **“for whom.”** Why more important? Well, let me put it this way, I'd never be able to explain why my friends are willing to have anything to do with me, why my wife loves me, or even why you all put up with me. At the same time, I know that all this love, care, and forbearance is “for me”, and knowing this makes all the difference. The same is true with the mystery of Christ's passion and death. So while we may never fully comprehend the “why” of God's unfathomable commitment **to us**, when we contemplate the cross of Christ we can never doubt God's profound love **for us**. And why nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. Knowing this makes all the difference!

Brothers and sisters, that's why the gospels tells this difficult story. That's why we listen to it every year. That's why preachers preach it. Because it is in Jesus Christ we have God's tangible and tenacious promise to be always and forever **for us**!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.