

A Sermon for Good Friday, Year B  
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## *Love on the Cross*

From the moment he began his public ministry, it seems that Jesus was at odds with just about every religious authority. It's not hard to see why.

When he healed the paralytic, Jesus declared that he had the authority to forgive sins; a privilege reserved for God alone. He healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, something he could have postponed for another day; demonstrating a belief that he felt no compunction at setting aside the Sabbath regulations. He declared that it's not what goes into a man that defiles him, but rather what comes from the heart; thus threatening to undo the entire Kosher system of dietary laws. He maintained that the poor, and *not* the rich, were blessed in the eyes of God; turning upside down that long-standing benchmark of who was blessed and who wasn't.

His teachings were radical and provocative; he implied that God preferred the prodigal son to the one who stayed at home, that God preferred the tax collector to the Pharisee, that God preferred the adulterers to their judges, and that God preferred the law-breakers to the guardians of the law. And to drive home this point, Jesus regularly associated with the most flagrant of sinners, and in the most intimate of social settings, and justified his behavior on the grounds that those who were well didn't need a physician, but rather the sick.

At every turn, Jesus talked about the character of God as one of immeasurable tenderness, and that God particularly cared about the abandoned and the oppressed. He talked about a God in whose Kingdom the value system of the prevailing culture was wholly reversed – in which the last would be first, and the first last. And the last straw for the Jewish authorities was when Jesus proclaimed himself “the resurrection and the life,” and then backed up the claim by raising Lazarus from the grave.

From the perspective of the Jewish religious leaders, Jesus had to die. And the Roman authorities agreed wholeheartedly.

The Romans knew about the political threat “messiahs” engendered, because they had dealt with so many of them before, and any time a new one popped up on their radar, they were viewed with suspicion. Because no wannabe-king was going to displace the Roman government. And even though Pilate was a pragmatic man, and was willing to have Jesus released, he still held to the belief that Rome had a divine mandate to bring order and civility to a warring world. Any rebellion, therefore, or any so-called messiah, that might try to interfere with that mandate, had to be extinguished immediately.

Yes, Jesus had to die.

But, in point of fact, it was neither the religious leaders, nor the civil authorities, that ultimately sent Jesus to the Cross. It was love; a love so great that it was willing to endure false accusations, rejection, and abandonment. It was a love that was willing to face torture and a slow execution. It is the love of a parent for his child. It is a love that says, "I will do this for you."

Sometimes, we can get so caught up in *thinking* about the Cross, and debating its meaning for humanity, that we forget to *feel* what Good Friday was like. That's part of what today is about: to feel the event. To feel the betrayal. To feel the injustice of an innocent death. And to feel the outrage that the whole event was sanctioned by the two noblest pillars of culture in the ancient world: Roman law, and Jewish piety. Sanctioned, in other words, *not* by humanity at its worst, but by humanity but at its *best*.

If we don't stop, and try to feel in our hearts what this day is all about, chances are we'll never really be able to understand it in our minds. And that'll be a shame, because that might mean that the phrase "God so loved the world" will remain merely a concept, and never be fully understood for what it truly is.

The Danish theologian, Søren Kierkegaard, once said that if there is one thing that unites us as Christians it is our forgetting, our overlooking, how much we have been loved by God in Christ. We are united not so much by what we have done, or left undone; by what we have believed, or not believed. We are united in *not* remembering with what great love we have been loved in Christ. We have not felt – and remembered in our hearts – that it wasn't the nails that kept Jesus on the cross. It was God's love. It was the love of our "Abba," our "daddy." This we should never forget.