
The Cross is Where Love Walks Through Death

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Good Friday – Year A

It's about walking. It's still about walking.

On Palm Sunday, the walking began in glory, with bright sun warming the labyrinth ground. It felt good to greet the refreshing morning. We walked with energy and hope.

For me, the day seemed just like the previous morning, a Saturday, when I had walked to the Cathedral Farmers Market, and greeted hot coffee, warm bread, and familiar friends. The community was rich and strong.

That Saturday, I kept walking, into Buckhead Village, noticing the optimistic new construction everywhere, and stepping into a little boutique store, just to see what they had. Wow! I never do that, step into a store just to see what they have! But I did that day. And I kept walking still.

I find that when I take my steps intentionally, deliberately, prayerfully, those steps become somehow holy. I begin to see the beauty of ordinary things. And the ordinary things become holy. It seems easier to smile at people.

I kept walking. I was deliberately not in a hurry. I stepped inside one of our local restaurants, one which has been closed for two years, and has now come back to life. It's been resurrected! It is in a new location, and I had to visit.

Then, I walked through the parking lot of the Cathedral. I knew that our family mini-retreat was occurring, and I knew that other visitors were elsewhere on the campus tending to things. I was walking, however, deliberately in the middle of the driveway. It is not the safest place to walk, but I do that occasionally here at the Cathedral, just to slow people down, especially when I have the time to engage people.

Yes, I was walking in a way to slow people down, especially people who were cutting through our Cathedral property, zooming through, in order to hurry their errands. It's our property, and people don't seem to know that. Thus, our parking lot is sometimes used as a convenient cut through, a way to get some place in a hurry. But, my thought is that the Cathedral is supposed to be the place that teaches us not to be in a hurry! It was fun to smile at people, and welcome them to the Cathedral!

But on Saturday, the passenger in one of the "cut-through cars" turned mean. The driver drove around me, but it was the back seat passenger who stepped out of the car and yelled at me, hollered at me. What was I doing walking down the middle of the road? I told him softly that I was slowing down the traffic that was zooming through our church property. We care for lots of people walking here, I said. Indeed, our youth and family retreat was occurring just then, on the lawn of the Lanier House.

Nothing further than that happened. The yelling man got back into the car, and they drove off. All was fine. I kept walking. But I have to admit that I also felt wounded, somehow stung by the man's anger, even though I also admit that I had opened myself up to it. I felt like my walking had taken me not only to the nice people around town; but my walking had also exposed me to the angry people around town.

Good walks do that. They take us everywhere. As I walked on, I realized how often our walks take us through the valley of the shadow of death.

My little skirmish with meanness was not a big deal. I knew I was risking absorbing another person's anger, and I did receive it. I figured I was absorbing that meanness on behalf of the church. I was stung by the guy, but it was nothing compared to the other ways that humanity strikes each other around this world.

My example is a small one. But maybe it gives a way of explaining what Jesus did on Good Friday. Jesus walked. And he walked deliberately. And he walked knowing full well that he was about to absorb the meanness and anger of the world. More than that, of course, he was about to absorb the sin and violence of the world.

On this Good Friday, please don't think about the old and worn-out ransom theories of atonement. Please disregard, in particular, any theory of so-called substitutionary atonement, the theory that Jesus violently dies in the place of humanity because God is owed justice. I have preached before about how meaningless those theories are. God does not demand blood because humanity has sinned. God is not a god of violence. Satan is not owed a ransom either. On Good Friday, there is not some cosmic judicial transaction going on.

The reason Jesus dies is because there is violence and death in the world, and Jesus dies to show us how to defeat that anger and death. Amidst all the anger and pain and violence of the world, Jesus demonstrates that there is a love that defeats violence and anger.

The reason we walk with Jesus to the cross today is so that we can touch even the painful and angry parts of the world – even the neighborhoods we would rather not walk through. The neighborhoods of cities, and the neighborhoods of our interior lives, too. There are areas of our own souls that we fear walking through.

Today is a day to walk through those interior neighborhoods, too – places where we are in pain, places where we are angry, places where we might even be violent. Jesus wants to absorb those places, too.

We have skirmishes with death every day. Those deaths are not just the physical deaths of people we love. We have little outbursts with anger every day, too, encountering it in others, and even delivering it ourselves. Pain and death reside not just out in the world, but also in every one of us.

Jesus Christ touched, absorbed, all those places when he walked to the cross. The reason, then, that we walk with Christ to the cross, is so that Christ can touch those awful and treacherous places in us. When Christ touches them, they become holy.

Yes, I know it is hard to call death holy. But even death becomes holy when the love of Christ touches it. We walk the way of the cross so that Christ can touch our pain, so that Christ can touch our anger, so that Christ can touch our death.

When Christ touches the suffering of the world, when Christ touches the sin of the world, nothing magical or transactional happens. The Cross is not some commercial or juridical exchange wherein an angry God is now satisfied that a penalty has been paid for human sin. We are not "sinners in the hand of an angry God!" That way of thinking perpetuates the sad system of violence and blood shedding. That way of thinking leads only to more unjustified suffering.

What happens, instead, when Christ touches the suffering and sin of the world, is that sin becomes emptied, suffering becomes dis-empowered. Sin and suffering lose any effect on us; they become meaningless, powerless. They wither away in the glory of love.

Yes, the cross is about love. Ultimately, the cross is where love touches the sin and suffering of the world. The cross is love, love absorbing anger and death, and de-powering them, in the name of God. The cross is where love walks through sin and death.

Our "Holy Week" is "Holy Walk." And our Holy Walk brings us to this day, Good Friday, gazing at the cross of Christ, so that we can absorb that love which we see in Christ. Every one of us has skirmishes with anger and death every day. And some of us have tremendous battles with anger and death. And all of us will eventually die. Every one of us walks, eventually, through the valley of the shadow of death.

The way to prepare for those skirmishes and battles, and for death itself, is to slow down and walk through them in small ways now, to take the time to learn how to encounter them daily. When we say that we take up our cross daily, we mean that we are choosing to take love with us on our daily walks; with love, we are willing to encounter violence and to absorb the tiny deaths that assault us every day.

The cross, then, is not where Jesus pays for sin. The cross is that place where love meets death. It is part of the Holy Walk of love. And love wins today. Love wins.

AMEN.

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