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## *This is What Love Looks Like*

**A sermon by Canon George Maxwell**  
**Good Friday – Year C**

Nothing else could have brought them together.

The women were there, some standing near the cross and others looking on from a distance.

The disciples were there, at least one of them standing with the women and others perhaps mingling with the crowd or watching from a safe distance away.

The soldiers were there, as were the chief priests and the members of the Sanhedrin, to ensure that things went as they should go.

Two bandits were there, one on either side of Jesus.

There was a crowd there too, some crying, some laughing, and some just wandering by.

I wonder what these people saw when they looked at the cross.

Standing alone, the cross was a powerful symbol.

You might think of it as a first century, Roman electric chair or guillotine. But, it wasn't used for ordinary criminals. It was reserved for those who challenged imperial authority.

When Jesus was a boy, Rome put down a revolt in Galilee by crucifying thousands of people. Crosses lined the roads. Those hanging on them suffered a prolonged, painful, and very public death.

Sometimes, of course, one cross was enough.

When the crowds became uneasy, provoked by growing rivalries or cycles of vengeance, the authorities performed their own liturgy of sacrifice.

There were the usual victims, someone who was different enough and weak enough for all of the various groups to despise.

An accusation of treason or heresy or something else that threatened the group as a whole transfigured even a victim like Jesus into a scapegoat responsible for all of the hatred and vengeance of the crowd.

They would all experience a false sense of salvation when he took the chaos that threatened them into death with him, but it was enough to restore the order that they thought they wanted.

But, this cross was different.

Jesus was on it.

It wasn't different just because Jesus was being crucified. His fate was not different from anyone else who had been branded as what amounts to a terrorist. His pain and suffering, while horrible, was actually less brutal than that suffered by most of the others who suffered his fate.

It was different because the one being crucified was Jesus!

Jesus was the one who spoke with authority, and not as the scribes or the other teachers of the law.

Jesus was the one who was to fulfill the law.

Jesus was the one who went home to the synagogue at Nazareth and read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He read about the prophet proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor and then he sat down and said to everyone there, "Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Lk. 4:16-21)

This is what the Apostle Paul was saying when he fought to include non-Jews as members of the early churches, of Christ's body, without requiring that they become Jews. The commitment of circumcision and the discipline of denying themselves certain foods were designed to create the kind of character. They didn't need to comply with every provision of the law if they had already experienced the presence and power of Christ, if they had already experienced the fulfillment of the law.

Yes, I wonder what these people saw when they looked at the cross

We are afraid of death and don't like to look at it directly. We often look away and miss some of the best parts of life to protect ourselves from the threat we think it poses to us.

But, Jesus had none of this fear.

He's not afraid of his enemies.

Don't worry about the ones who will kill your body, he says. Worry about the ones who can destroy your soul. (Mt. 12:14)

He's not afraid of the authorities.

He is obedient only to his Father.

He's not afraid of the lepers or the outcasts or the sinners.

He's not afraid of eating the wrong foods, or being in the wrong places, or touching the wrong people.

And, as a result, he has great freedom.

He goes where he wants to go. He talks to whom he wants to talk. He eats with whom he wants to eat.

He loves those he meets and those who appreciate his compassion love him back.

The lepers and the outcasts and the sinners and, under the cover of darkness, even the religious leaders want to be with Jesus, to talk to Jesus, and to eat with Jesus.

Even little children found a home in his arms.

Jesus promises life.

So, I wonder, what the people gathered around the cross saw when they looked up at Jesus and saw him looking back at them.

Did they see the fulfillment of the scriptures?

Did they see what love really looks like?

Did they see the kind of love that gives itself away, the kind of love that places itself at the disposal of others, the kind of love that always acts out of obedience to God?

Or, did they see death?

Did they see threat, and limit, and fear?

Increasingly, it seems to me that this is a choice we all make when we look up at the cross and see Jesus there looking back at us.

Do we see death or do we see life?

To see death causes us to ball up our fists and put up our defenses. It is to fall back into ourselves and defend with even greater desperation the self-constructed image of ourselves that we have worked so hard to create.

It closes us off from other people. It weakens us. It leaves us afraid.

When we adopt this posture, we can't look at Jesus very directly for very long.

But, to see the promise of life is to watch the unmasking of our own inability to love ... and to keep looking at Jesus.

To see the promise of life is watch Jesus love and forgive us in ways that we don't deserve ... and to keep looking at Jesus.

To see the promise of life is to watch those around us who seem so different from us – the soldiers, the bandits, the passers-by – are really our brothers and sisters ... and to keep looking at Jesus.

This is not a like closed fist; it's more like an open hand.

It's more like going through life with an open hand, as if by opening our hands we are opening our hearts and by opening our hearts we are opening our lives and by opening our lives we are revealing the glory of God.

This is what love looks like.

So, I wonder. I wonder what you will see when you look up and the cross and see Jesus looking back at you.