
This is What Love Looks Like

**A sermon by the Rev. 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 farther away.

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

The soldiers were there, as were the chief priests and the members of the Sanhedrin, to ensure that things went as they were supposed to 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. It wasn't used for ordinary criminals, though. 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. The roads were lined with crosses. To hang on a cross is to suffer a prolonged, painful, and very public death.

Sometimes, of course, one cross is enough.

When the crowds grow restless, threatening the ruling powers and principalities, there always seems to be a leader or false prophet who reaches for a cross.

Guilt or innocence isn't the question.

It's not about justice.

It's about feeding the frenzy of the crowd.

The appearance of peace becomes more important than the reality of justice.

Pain and suffering are just the price that must be paid.

This is what Jeremiah is talking about when he prophesies about the fall of Jerusalem and the exile of the people of God to Babylon (around the late seventh to early sixth century BCE).

"They ... [cry] 'Peace, peace,'" he warns, "when there is no peace." (Jer. 6:14; 8:11)

This cross, of course, was different.

Jesus was on it.

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

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 fulfilled the law.

Jesus was the one without the inclination to sin, without egoism, hatred, or greed.

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, while leaving out the prophet's reference to vengeance, 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 a character of holiness. 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 miss some of the best parts of life by looking away from death and trying to protect ourselves from the threat we think it poses to us.

Jesus is free from 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 people with leprosy, 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 enjoys perfect 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 people with leprosy, the outcasts, 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.

Little children find 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 holds nothing back, the kind of love that bears pain rather than inflicting it, the kind of love that forgives rather than retaliates against others, the kind of love that remains faithful even when abandoned, mocked, and crucified?

... or did they just see death?

Did they see nothing but pain and suffering, followed by the loss of what they thought they wanted most?

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 just see death, or do we see the promise of life?

To just see death causes us to ball up our fists and get ready for a fight.

We feel like something bad is about to happen and we can't do anything about it.

We double down on our defense of the image of ourselves that we have so carefully curated for the world to see.

We sense that we are being consumed by fear, mingled with anger, blame, and envy.

When we adopt this posture, we won't be able to look directly at Jesus for very long.

... and we won't be able to see what is really real.

To see the promise of life, though, is like opening our hand to receive a gift that we can't earn and don't deserve ... and, despite the dangerous feeling of dependence, to keep looking at Jesus.

To see the promise of life is to realize that we are fully loved even though we are not capable of loving others fully ... and to keep looking at Jesus.

To see the promise of life is to realize that we have been forgiven in ways that we have not forgiven others ... 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—and realize that they are really our brothers and sisters ... and to keep looking at Jesus.

It's 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.

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