

**Good Friday March 30, 2018**

**Who Cares?**

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Bible translator, scholar, teacher, and retired Bishop of Durham, N.T. Wright, recently wrote in one of his Lenten devotional blog entries about a story he recalled hearing about the power of the cross. He claimed it is a true story, although he has forgotten the name of the person involved.

It's a story about three teenage boys who decided to have some fun at a Roman Catholic church by going to confession, and confess the most outlandish made up acts they could imagine. The priest who listened to them was an old hand at hearing confessions and knew what the boys were up to. As their false confession drew to a close, two of the boys were having such a hard time holding back their laughter, they had to practically run out of the church before the priest could respond. But one teenager didn't leave early, and to this teenage boy, the priest gave the following act of penance: The boy had to walk down the center aisle of the church until he was as close as he could get to the large crucifix that hung on the wall above the altar. The boy then had to look at the face of Jesus and say three times that Jesus suffered for him, and he didn't care.

The story goes the boy did as the priest said. He walked down the aisle. He looked at the face of Jesus hanging on the cross. He said out loud that he did not care that Jesus suffered for him. But he only said it twice. Not three times. He couldn't say his true confession a third time because the horrible truth of it hit home, and the boy began to weep.

That teenage boy, N.T. Wright said, felt something so powerful at the foot of the cross that day he changed. At the cross he was confronted with his own worst self and God's love and felt God's love reach out to and into him. That same teenage boy later was ordained a priest, and eventually became an archbishop.

While N.T. Wright may not be able to remember the name of the archbishop who had that powerful experience of transformation at the foot of the cross, that does not diminish the power of the story. It's a good story. While it can be interpreted as a clever way to use guilt to manipulate a disrespectful teenager; to me it is something else. It is quite easy to relate to. For in that story is the very same thing all of us who are here tonight on Good Friday have come to do. Which makes it a good Good Friday story.

By now, we've heard the account of Jesus' crucifixion not once but twice this Holy Week, as we heard Mark's version back on Palm Sunday and tonight we heard John's powerful version. While all 4 Gospels were written at different times, in different communities, and have slightly different side stories, the details of the crucifixion itself are not different. Jesus' arrest, trail, suffering, death, and burial had a drastic impact on his followers. Even though Jesus had tried to teach them he would be raised after 3 days, on the day Jesus died none of his followers could believe it. Even Jesus' last words from the cross are words of death, not words promising to return. He's no Arnold Schwarzenegger character promising to come back. Instead he declared, "It is finished."

What he meant by those words has been the topic of theological discussion ever since his resurrection 3 days later. We're still talking about it today. And there are lots of ideas, theories, even doctrines to tell us what it means. For some it simply means his life was over. Others say he was quoting from a psalm, perhaps as a prayer. Others say the powers of the devil were finished that day. Others say it was the powers of death itself that died. Others say it is God's anger that is over, as the death of God's Son was the only thing that could sooth the great anger of God. Others say what is over is the divide between humans and God. And for every doctrine, every idea, every thought, there is a voice or two that rises up to question or argue against them. Such is the way of discussions.

But tonight, on Good Friday itself, those discussions sort of fade into the background like so much noise from a crowd, as we are brought face to face with the cross and the suffering Jesus. Regardless of what we believe about the cross, today we are called to face the cross and Jesus' death and are led to face the terrible truth about ourselves: that Jesus suffered, and Jesus died and, at lease most of the time, we don't really care. We may not be as rude or disrespectful as the three teenage boys from the story, but there are ways we show our carelessness. Tonight, I don't have to remind us of all those ways in a sermon. It's all over the liturgy.

In a few moments we will start the part of this service where we read what are called the "Solemn Collects" and in the words of those collects we not only pray for leaders and those we usually pray for every Sunday, we also name some of the ways we have failed to care. Such as when we as a church have been more worried about the number or prestigious status of the people in the pews than the message we proclaim. Or when we've cared more about our personal convenience, comfort or entertainment than the welfare of another, or that of this "fragile earth, our island home." When we've hidden behind a false sense of peace instead of having the honest conversations we need to have. When we've cursed our fellow human beings

instead of bless them. When we've loved violence or power. Whenever we fail to recognize or see or notice the ways God does indeed make new or renew that which had grown old or lift up that which was cast down or thrown away. Whenever we've failed to love God by respecting the dignity of every human being, even those human beings we disagree with, don't like, can't stand, have hurt or have hurt us.

There is more to Good Friday than confessing how we care more for ourselves than God. If there weren't then I doubt we could call it 'good'. There is the very thing about the cross that reached out the one teenage boy in the story that changed him. The Love of God, which is perhaps something too big or too much or too extravagant or too mysterious to try and describe. But that doesn't mean it isn't real. As the great 20<sup>th</sup> Century Christian Apologist and writer C. S. Lewis has written many times, God's Love is more Real than anything we can imagine or create on our own. And I tend to agree with Lewis on that.

Good Friday is a day that for me is also about relationships. Our relationship with God and God's relationship with us. One of the most important things about relationships for me is that they are something between more than one person. Everyone in the relationship contributes to it. Everyone gives what they can when they can, and everyone receives at times too. The key is to never take more than you give, especially over a long period of time.

Tonight, as we look at that awful cross, where Jesus died, we do indeed see all our sins: our anger, our rejection of God, our rejection of each other, or love of self. And if we dare to face those things, and look deeper, we'd see something else. We'd see the love of God looking right back at us, loving us through it all.

Good Friday is the day we admit once again we human beings can be pretty bad at relationships, which is what loving God and loving each other means. Because we just fail to care. But the good news is our selfishness is not all there is; there is God and God's Love reaching out to us through all our bad excuses and our failed attempts to love. And God who can take our failures at love and transform them, looks out through the cross where God's Son died and sees: YOU. And despite all of it, God loves you back.

A few Sundays ago, I said in a sermon that the cross is the lens Jesus wants us to see Jesus through. Maybe because the cross is where God looks through God's Son and sees and loves you.

And that is what makes today good. Even if we don't understand it. Or believe it. Or think we need to discuss it a bit more. After the Solemn Collects, tonight we'll be bringing a wooden cross down the aisle and laying it at the foot of the altar. While not the same cross upon which Jesus died, it offers us the same opportunity that cross does: to come down the aisle ourselves and look at the cross, to look upon our worst selves and see God loving us back through it all and let God's love touch and transform us. I understand a lot of people have trouble with what is called the Veneration of the Cross, and with all the ceremony that can go along with it, I can understand why. I can also understand any residual feelings of shame or guilt can also influence how someone might interpret this Good Friday tradition. But I do not believe such things were the original intention of this tradition. Instead it is simply the chance to acknowledge the suffering of Jesus, and how we don't care, and through that honest confession, let God's love reach out in love and forgiveness and transform our carelessness into something closer to God's love. That is your opportunity this Good Friday and it's a good one.