

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ

Richard E. Sindall, Pastor

Reflection for the Maundy Thursday Communion Service, April 9, 2009

Readings: Isaiah 53:4-6 and Mark 15:16-41

(Mark read in 3 sections interspersed with verses of, "Were You There?")

## WERE WE THERE? WAS I?

Was I there when Jesus was crucified? The most obvious, unreflective answer is, of course, "No." Jesus of Nazareth was crucified almost two thousand years ago. But the literal is not always the truest.

Sacramentally, I have been there many times and will be there again with you this evening. In my hands I will hold the symbolic elements of his humiliation, suffering, and death, and by taking those symbols of his broken body into my own living body, I will confess both that Jesus did it *for me* and, also, that he "had to" do it *because of me*. He did not "have to" do it, of course, except that he was compelled by his faithfulness to the unyielding love of God for this world and its people. By eating the bread and drinking from the cup, I will admit that I am the reason for his crucifixion in both senses: he did it *for me*, because God loves me, and he did it *because of me*, because of my alienation from God and from other people. I am both the beneficiary and the cause of his pain.

This evening, I am there, there in the flesh, as one loved by God and, at the same time, one alienated from God, still divided from other people, and still a long way from being the person God created me to become. So, here I am again, hoping and trusting that this simple ritual somehow brings me into closer contact with Jesus in his passion, somehow takes hold of me and brings home to me that terrible event on which my life, my hope, and my salvation depend.

But the sacramental is not enough. To be there with him, I need to find him crucified in my real world and not just in the peace and calm of the sanctuary, in the familiar words and actions of the sacrament. A crucifixion was very much an event of the flesh. It was torture and humiliation, very bodily. If God's love and presence were incarnated (made flesh) for us in the birth of the baby Jesus, how much more so in the breaking of the man's body? His crucifixion is the supreme incarnation of God's love and presence. Humanity did not just get to see, hear, and touch him; we got to mock, torture, and kill him. We made the incarnation of God's love suffer and die.

How can we go beyond the sacramental in being there when and where Jesus is crucified? I think we can start by realizing that Jesus suffered not only *for this world* but also *with it*. On the cross he represented God fully to us, in his own dying human body, *and* he also represented us to God, as the human put to shame and suffering in an unjust, often seemingly Godless world. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus of Nazareth dies with – in unity with – all the countless God-forsaken people in our world.

The sacramental is good, helpful, and sustaining, but it is not enough. We need to find him crucified in the real, everyday world around us. Once we understand, once our eyes have been opened and our ears unplugged, he is not hard to find. He’s there, every day, all around us in what theologians call the *cruciform*. What is the cruciform? Literally, it is anything in the shape or form of a cross, but in theology it refers to the many experiences of life people find themselves forced to share with the crucified Jesus, whether or not they realize they are sharing in his experience and he in theirs. Life is harsh and often most unfair by any reasonable standard of judgment, and people can be cruel. Sometimes people are quite actively and brutally cruel; at other times, they are more casual, even offhand, about their cruelties – dismissive of those made to suffer, of those cheated, of those left out.

The cruelties, brutal or polite, have this in common: they proceed by dehumanizing their victims. Did you notice as I read from the Gospel of Mark how much emphasis the passion narrative puts on the shaming of Jesus? Despite Mel Gibson’s bloody depiction, the gospels have far more to say about Jesus’ humiliation than about his physical pain. Crucifixion was designed as public shaming, to make an example of the rebel and so attach shame to anyone who would consider rebellion against the empire that people would turn away from following him. The would-be leader of the rebellion was to die screaming, cursing, and begging while being mocked and taunted the whole while, sometimes for hours, sometimes for days. Notice the Pilate is surprised Jesus has died so soon. For the person crucified, death is the savior that never comes soon enough.

“Where you there when they crucified my Lord?” That song comes from a human experience that is, indeed, cruciform because it was so dehumanizing and humiliating. To be a slave is to be, twenty-four hours every day, less than a person. We even debated the fraction of a person by which a slave should be counted so the slave states could get more voting power without having to admit the unthinkable, that slaves were people.

We are people and for the most part acknowledged as such, though not always. Go and stand with the unpopular, and you may find your status suddenly reduced to the level of theirs. And there it is, the link that takes us beyond the sacramental. Empathy that comes from standing with and among the people regarded as shameful, as less than valid human beings, unites us with Jesus crucified. Empathy speaks of suffering shared not just pitied.

We can indulge in sympathy from a safe distance, but true empathy requires interaction, dialogue, and identification. Jesus branded himself a sinner by hanging around with sinners, treating them with respect, and sharing the scorn they received from the commendable people.

At the Lord's Table, I know anew that I am not one of the commendable people, those who live exemplary lives. Jesus made a practice of pointing out to those people that they were not so commendable as they pretended to be. They were playing the role of exemplary people, and so they were actors, role-players, for which the gospels' term is *hypocrite*. Here in the sacrament, I know again as I receive the symbols of his humiliation, that Jesus endured it willingly both *for me* and *because of me*. There is nothing commendable in that. But there is grace, and there is hope. I believe there is also a challenge and a calling. As the followers of Jesus who put our trust in him, we need to be there, where he is being crucified. We can be there with him when we stop playing the role of exemplary and commendable and when we, instead, enter into the shame and grief of people whose experience of life is cruciform. For where they are, there he is also. Amen.