

Sermon preached by
The Reverend William J. Eakins
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“Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed...”

Why does Jesus keep talking about the necessity of his suffering and death? These are certainly odd things to stress unless, of course, one is a masochist. No wonder Peter is so disturbed by this morbid foreboding. I can imagine Peter taking Jesus aside and asking, “What are you talking about, Jesus? You’re supposed to be God’s Anointed One; we’re counting on you to be the Messiah who will lead Israel to freedom and glory. How can you do that if you are rejected and put to death?” Then Jesus with a flash of vehemence that he shows only rarely turns to Peter and delivers the strongest of rebukes: “Get behind me, Satan! ... You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Those last words of Jesus’ rebuke are of key importance. The clash between Peter and Jesus is about dramatically different expectations. Peter, along with many of his Jewish contemporaries, expects the Messiah to be a hero who will wondrously overthrow Israel’s Roman conquerors, restore Israel’s sovereignty, and usher in a new era of prosperity. Jesus, however, has come to an altogether different conclusion about the kind of Messiah God has called him to be. The kind of Messiah that God, not human beings, has in mind is not the conquering hero but the suffering servant.

When Jesus rebukes Peter with those stern words, “Get behind me, Satan,” it is because Peter’s attempt to dissuade Jesus from the way of the cross reminds Jesus of his struggle with Satan over this same issue. In the wilderness experience that followed Jesus’ Baptism, Satan, the great tempter, tried to convince Jesus to take the expected and easy path of Messiahship. First, there was Satan’s suggestion that Jesus be a wonder-working Messiah who would do tricks like turning stones into bread. Jesus rejected that temptation saying that we “shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” Jesus would be a Messiah who would fill our hunger for God, not just our hunger for food. Satan then offered to make Jesus the ruler of all the Kingdoms of this world. “Just think what good you might do, Jesus, with all that power.” When Jesus rejected the offer, he was saying “no” to being a political leader who could force us to obey him. Instead Jesus would seek to bring about changes in the world by changing people’s hearts. Finally, Satan presented Jesus with the choice of being a Messiah who would be exempt from pain and suffering. Surely God’s Messiah would have a right to protection. Angels would hold Jesus in their hands “lest he dash his foot against a stone.” When Jesus rejected that offer, Jesus was choosing to take up the cross and enter fully into all the pain and suffering human beings have ever known.

So then, when Jesus began to teach his disciples that “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected ... and killed,” Jesus was not just predicting the future; he was announcing his mission, what he “must” do. When Jesus stretched out his arms to be nailed to the cross, God would reveal the full breadth and depth of God’s love.

Many centuries ago on the island of Formosa, there lived a Chinese governor whose name was Goho. Goho was a man of humane and liberal outlook for his time and was respected and loved by all the people. One of Goho’s first acts as governor was to induce the tribes under him to abandon the ancient custom of offering a human sacrifice each year to ensure a good harvest. Goho persuaded the farmers to be content with the sacrifice of an ox or a pig. For forty years this new arrangement worked out well. The animals were killed and the crops flourished. But then there came several years of drought and disastrous harvests. There was not enough to eat and people began to be frightened. Their leaders came to Goho and said that the animal sacrifices would no longer do. The gods were angry; they must have a human sacrifice once again or there would be no rain. Goho argued and pleaded with them, but in vain. The gods must be satisfied, insisted the people. Finally, seeing that

he could no longer prevail against the people's wishes, Goho yielded. "Tomorrow at dawn," he said, "go to the place of sacrifice in the forest, and there you will find the victim ready - a man tied to a tree, wearing the red robe of sacrifice and a red cloth tied over his face and head. Strike, for he is your victim!"

The next morning the people gathered at the appointed place and there they saw the victim dressed in red, his face covered with a red cloth. One of the leaders stepped forward and with a sharpened sword struck off the victim's head. When the red cloth fell away, the face of the man was revealed. It was Goho himself. The people were appalled by what they had done, and from that day on, no human sacrifice was ever offered in Formosa again. By the sacrifice of his own life, Goho did what by his rule and teachings he had so far failed to do. He changed his people's hearts and minds, and he changed them permanently.

Sometimes it takes a tragic death to bring people to their senses and bring about a change of heart or a change in point of view. Fifth years ago the shooting of Martin Luther King, Jr. as he stood on the balcony of a motel in Memphis, Tennessee, shocked our nation into a new sensitivity to the evil of racism. The tragedy gave us a renewed commitment to end racial segregation and reinvigorated the American civil rights movement.

In May of 1970, members of the Ohio National Guard fired upon unarmed students at Kent State University, students who were protesting against the American war in Vietnam. Four of the students were killed, nine others were wounded, one of who suffered permanent paralysis. The Kent State shootings produced a powerful national response. Hundreds of universities, colleges, and high schools were closed due to a strike of four million students. Public opinion across the nation shifted significantly against U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

Likewise two weeks ago the mass shooting of students at a high school in Parkland, Florida, started a movement that might bring about change in our country's gun laws. "Never again!" and "Enough is enough!" have been the rallying cries of angry students in Florida and around the country since the deadly shooting. The loss of innocent young people at the hands of a deranged teenage assassin may well prove the tipping point that moves the national conversation about gun control out of stalemate into effective action. The outrage of America's youth will then be vindicated, and the deaths in Parkland High School will not have been in vain.

When Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem and the death that awaited him there, he did so with the awareness that this was what was necessary to change *us*. Jesus knew that his teaching alone did not have the power to turn human beings from the error of our ways and open our hearts to God's love and mercy. All the Sermons on the Mount that he could ever preach could not accomplish this. It would take Jesus' death on the cross, a death Jesus took up willingly, to show us the extravagance of God's love. Only the cross would have the power to break down the walls of race, class, and clan, of fear, hatred, and resentment that divide the human race and make us one united people. Only the cross would have the power to make us turn away from selfishness and fear and dedicate ourselves to the God who loves us so dearly.

Why did Jesus insist on the necessity of his rejection, suffering, and death? The answer we give to that question is far from academic: it will determine how we live.

Some look on the cross and see nothing but the spiritual bankruptcy of the human race. Jesus is just another innocent victim of humanity's cruelty and blindness. Such a view will lead us to frustration, sadness, and cynicism. "What's the use of sticking your neck out; what's the use of trying to make the world a better place? You'll only end up on a cross like Jesus."

Some look on the cross and see Jesus' dying there to satisfy the requirements of an angry God: Jesus had to die to pay the price of our sins. Such a view certainly stresses a God of justice, but by itself does not give an adequate picture of a God of love. What's more, people who focus on God's justice often get judgmental themselves. Here's a local example: During the debate on capital punishment in Connecticut a few years ago, there were Christians who argued that the death penalty is indeed a holy and righteous thing. Why? Because if God imposed it on his own Son, why should we have mercy?

Others look on the cross and see Jesus dying there to reveal once and for all the mercy of God. God so loves the world and everyone in it that in Jesus God gave God's very life for us. Catch but a glimpse of that view of the cross and your heart will turn to God. And isn't that what God really desires? Isn't that the only thing that will change the world?