

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Hebrews 5:5-10

John 12:20-33

Psalm 51:1-13

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The Paradox of the Cross

One day Joe came to the food pantry run by the church. He was an older gentleman who wore the weary, line-marked face of someone for whom life had been a struggle. We began to talk as he candidly shared some of his life story and the turbulent ups and downs he experienced over the years. He talked about his time in prison; his battle with his addiction to alcohol and drugs, and the tragedy of losing loved ones to violence and disease. What prompted me to ask Joe more about his life was that I learned that Joe was a poet. In fact, he had been writing poetry for most of his life and he had even published a book of poems. Joe said that it was no small miracle that he was still alive. I asked him what sustained him through all these challenges and setbacks and he said quite bluntly that it was his faith and his writing. He said God saved his life more times than he could count and, because of that, he vowed to never give up no matter how difficult life may be because God had not given up on him. Joe had been sober for over a decade, rebuilding his life one day at a time, sometimes five minutes at a time. He was quiet, unassuming and spoke with an incredible sense of gratitude and love for the new life he had been given. There is no question in my mind that Joe has experienced the salvation Jesus reveals on the cross.

Our reading from John's gospel begins with some Greeks who are from out of town and in Jerusalem for the Passover festival. They tell Philip, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" (John 12:20). We never learn whether the Greeks ever meet Jesus. However, Jesus takes this moment to share in a most sobering way the unvarnished truth of how his mission here on earth will come to a climax shortly. Previously, Mary anointed his feet with precious oil and Lazarus has been raised from the grave. The crowds are growing as Jesus' reputation spreads while those threatened by his increasing influence plot to do away with him, including one of his own disciples. There is much to absorb as we try to understand this weighty and somewhat cryptic passage.

Jesus shares a parable about a grain of wheat that falls into the earth and must die so that it will be fruitful or it will remain alone, isolated and wither away. He talks about those who love their life so much to the point of excluding others, they will become the walking dead, never knowing what it means to be fully alive. Those who love beyond themselves, sharing their love with others will live an abundant life that does not end. With these images of life, death and eternal life, Jesus is foretelling of his own death that will occur in just a matter of days.

We are witnesses to Jesus, God's only Son, preparing himself now that his "hour" has come. He is in deep anguish as he struggles with the reality that his mission can only be fulfilled by completely surrendering himself to God.¹ "Now my soul is troubled." (John 12:27) This one small sentence reveals in a most poignant way Jesus' full humanity and vulnerability, knowing that he will die in a most painful and humiliating way as he draws the world to himself. We will also be reminded of Jesus' humanness when he sweats droplets of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane as he awaits his arrest by the Roman soldiers. And, just a few hours later as he hangs dying from the cross, he will cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt.3:6).

It may seem absurd or even disturbing to envision the Son of Man, who is also fully divine, experiencing these very human emotions of fear, anger, pain and even doubt. But, this is the very thing that makes our relationship with him possible. Because of Jesus' humanness we can take great solace in knowing that he experiences everything we do as a human being. How could we possibly relate to a god who is completely removed from our human experience, having no earthly (pun intended) idea what it means to be fully human?

Jesus' death on the cross reveals that God's love for you and me is authentic.² The cross reveals a God that suffers with us and not apart from us. It reveals that no matter what evil the world can inflict on Jesus, nothing can diminish his love for God.³ And, we are assured that there is nothing, absolutely nothing we can do that will ever separate us from God's love, not even deicide, the murder of a god.

It is unfortunate that for the several generations theologians have equated Jesus' saving act of death on the cross as a blood sacrifice necessary to appease an angry and vindictive God who demands payment to cancel out our sins.⁴ This is not the God of love and mercy we see made flesh in Jesus.⁵ The God we see revealed in his Son is the same God that reaches out to us in love, seeking to be reconciled to us, through grace, God's abundant and self-giving love we witness in Jesus. Theologian Michael Battle reminds us that Jesus' final act of self-surrendering of love on the cross removes any "inseparable barriers between God and the world."⁶

The cross becomes our pathway toward salvation where we experience the reconciling love of God that is the source of the eternal life Jesus promises us. There is no salvation without the cross. "Whoever serves me must follow me" (John 12:26). For us to live as Jesus lived means we no longer live only for ourselves. As Jesus' followers our "hour" has also come. We are called to make sacrifices, to die to our old ways of being

¹ Margaret A. Farley, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2*, eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008),142.

²Michael Battle, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2*, eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008),142.

³ Farley, 142.

⁴ Farley.

⁵ Farley.

⁶ Battle, 142.

in the world; to let go of all those things that separate us from God's redeeming love and each other. And, when we do, we, like the grain of wheat that must die to be fruitful, we are transformed. It is in loving and serving others that we begin to be truly alive and experience God's saving grace.

Frederick Buechner, writer and pastor, reminds us that salvation must first be experienced to be understood.⁷ "Doing the work you're best at and like to do best; hearing great music; having great fun; seeing something very beautiful; weeping at somebody else's tragedy – all these experiences are related to the experience of salvation because in all of them two things happen: (1) you lose yourself, and, (2) you find that you are more fully yourself than usual."⁸ We become the person God intended us to be when we love somebody because our focus has shifted. We are no longer the center of our own universe, someone else is.⁹ "You forget yourself. You deny yourself. You give of yourself so that by all the rules of arithmetical logic there should be less of yourself than there was to start with. Only by a curious paradox is there more. You feel that at last you really are yourself."¹⁰

⁷Frederick Buechner, *Weekly Sermon Illustration: Salvation*, <http://frederickbuechner.com/content/weekly-sermon-illustration-salvation>, last accessed Mar. 19, 2015.

⁸ Id.

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ Id.