

Years ago on a Good Friday, I was straightening up the small chapel following the evening's liturgy. Someone remained in the shadows of the chapel to pray. I couldn't quite make out who it was, but I could hear her crying. I made my way quietly to see if I could sit with her for a while. We sat in silence, and then she grabbed my hand. "Every year I hear this story," she said. "Every year I want so much for the ending to be different. And it never is"

She didn't have to tell me why she kept coming back each Good Friday, even though it pained her deeply. She needed to feel that pain to experience God's deep love as displayed on the cross.

Many people, good faithful people, want no part of that pain. And choose to skip the Good Friday liturgy because of it. I need to be here to bear witness to this darkest moment in history which also holds the greatest love God offers. I need to be here with you and be reminded that the worst we can do cannot kill the love God has for us.

We cannot ignore the pain of the cross. We can pretty it up by calling today Good Friday. By wearing stylized crosses as jewelry, and by shining spotlights of beautifully rendered furniture. We cannot ignore the questions the cross stirs in our souls. *What happened? How did everything go so wrong? Was this violent end part of God's plan? Did Jesus die in my place? Am I why Jesus died? Am I for whom Jesus died?*

Here's what I believe. As Jesus moved steadily toward Jerusalem at the end of his ministry, I *believe* he stood for love and reconciliation to the end. His message of peace led to a violent death. His faithfulness to God's vision for all of creation led to betrayal and alienation. All who followed him failed before the power of the Roman Empire, but he never gave in and His love for us never failed.

I *believe* that Jesus died in the way he did *because* this world is sinful. Because from the beginning humankind has always believed that violence will solve some things. Because humankind insists on putting up barriers to God's love. And thought God's love was destroyed when Christ was killed.

I *believe* Jesus' suffering and death is the ultimate in God's pattern of holy reversal: These ironies are painful and disarming. Jesus message of peace led to violence. His faithfulness was countered with betrayal. His meekness was met with mockery. The most powerful of all, God's own Son, became powerless.

This Jesus who hangs breathless on a cross, whose figure we can barely see through our shame, demonstrates a God whose creation matters, and whose creatures make a difference to God. This dying Jesus demonstrates a God whose purpose was not deterred by pain caused by the very creation he shaped. I *believe* God's love for each of us and God's love for all of us has no limits.

I *believe* Jesus wasn't put to death for doing something wrong, even Pilate admitted that; but *because somebody needed to be right*. That is our humankind's tragic downfall: Needing to be right, no matter the cost. On that day, when humankind was at its worst, I believe God was at God's best: Jesus humiliation and death points to God's unending willingness to participate in creation. Even death is now made holy because Jesus himself has been there.

An innocent man died that day, and in my darkest days it frightens me to think that it might have meant nothing because we have learned nothing from it. As horrible, as needless, as bloody as that one death was, the continuing tragedy is that the violence has not ever stopped. The challenge for us is to get beyond this horror, yet not leave it behind. To learn from it in order to change everything, or something, or perhaps, dear God, to change just one thing about this broken world. I *believe* we must feel that grip of death and evil so close that it enrages and enlivens us and moves us to respond to God's love for us with compassion and action. I *believe* that if the cross we venerate in this church in a moment focuses us only on personal devotion, then we do not honor the life or the death of Jesus Christ.

In many parts of the world, this image of a suffering dying God, which we may wish to recoil from, this image is comforting. A suffering God suffers alongside the oppressed, hungry, abused, emotionally tortured, the dying. The moment Jesus died, we are told in the gospel of Matthew, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. I had always thought that meant that every barrier between us and God was finally gone because of Jesus' sacrifice. But a Jewish scholar also notes that tearing one's clothes is a Jewish manifestation of grief. Suggesting that God *himself* was grieving, in mourning for his son.

I **know** that we are surrounded by those whose lives are filled with suffering, we live and work with those who are aching to know of God's great love for them. and we honor Jesus Christ when we work to bring God's love to any who suffer or hunger for God.

If we matter to God, if we mattered enough for Jesus to offer his life for the world, we must matter to those around us. If God's love matters to us at all, we can be the ending my weeping friend hoped for. *believe* we can make a difference to those who suffer beside us. I *believe* we must make a difference to those who yearn to know of God's great love; a difference, in the name of the Crucified Christ. Amen.