

Matthew 27:26-31, 39-46, 50-54
“The Sacrifice of Suffering Love”

In a book *An Altar in the World*, author, teacher, and Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor points out that most of the world religions have their origins in suffering. We have only to remember 9-11 and how many Americans at that time went back to churches. And now amid the Covid 19 pandemic, many would probably do the same, except the churches themselves have been closed or put on virtual status. The turn toward the spiritual is often temporary, and may exclude traditional religious institutions, but it still represents an attempt to grapple with suffering.

Christianity emerged out of Jesus ministering to a suffering people, people who thought God had abandoned them to the domination of occupying authorities. His holy caring for others in their pain led to death on a cross. The stories of that suffering death fill large chunks of our gospels and come to the fore in the 7 weeks of Lent prior to Easter.

The basic events most of us have heard. Jesus went to Jerusalem during Passover to stage two demonstrations. One demonstration was against the violent Roman authorities, a demonstration he staged by riding into the city, not on a Roman war horse, but on a gentle donkey, perhaps even a gentle mother donkey nursing a colt. The other demonstration was against the Jewish authorities, a demonstration he staged by overturning the tables of the money changers in the temple, money changers who were ripping off the common folk and making it hard to even pray in the temple courts.

Jesus taught the crowds in those temple courts. His teaching rejected the dominating violence of the Romans and Herod. His teaching advocated economic equality in a society where 90% were peasants.

His teaching tried to dissolve the racial boundaries between Jews and Samaritans. His teaching gave new status to women and children. His teaching presented a love that accepted those deemed sinful and impure. His teaching put God-lines above family bloodlines. His teaching gave new interpretation to the law, and looked beyond temple sacrifices. Though the Jewish people didn't fully understand these teachings, they understood enough to give forth hosannas and praise. The Jewish crowds in general protected Jesus from the Roman and Jewish authorities who wanted him out of the picture.

Despite winning the admiration of the crowds and disciples, Jesus found there were things even his closest disciples couldn't grasp. Though sharing a Last Supper with disciples, he was betrayed by one of them named Judas, a man who told the authorities where they could find Jesus, apart from the protection of crowds. Jesus was denied and abandoned by his other disciples upon arrest.

Strangely Jesus seemed to walk toward his death with a certain dignity. Jesus went to death, not because God demanded or wanted it, as some like to think today, but because Jesus wanted to stick up for God's eternal way. That way had love at its heart, a sharing of nonviolent peace, a sharing of bread for all, a sharing of healing, and a sharing of God's grace. Jesus had a passion for God's compassion, and that passion gave him dignity even in the face of death.

Thousands of years later, Jewish psychiatrist Viktor Frankl advocated this same dignity when he went through the hellish suffering of a German concentration camp, losing even his wife. One day he was faced with a man and woman ready to commit suicide.

They told him they expected nothing else from life. Frankl quietly asked his fellow prisoners if the question was really what we expect from life or what life expects from us.

It was this same dignity that was exemplified by the husband of a woman who lived in the village of Obermmergau, Germany. Since the 16th century, a passion play has been put on every 10 years in the village. Its depiction of the whole village crowd crying "hosanna" in the morning and 'crucify' 6 hours later in the afternoon, led watchers like Adolph Hitler to gravitate toward anti-Semitism. In recent decades, the villagers have tried to take some of the anti-Jewish drift out of the performance. After World War II in the year 1950, two Englishmen went to the village for the play and stayed in the home of the village woman. Her husband had been a prisoner and victim of the war, and had sent her two packages before his death. One contained a beautiful vase and napkin rings, all carved from bone. The other contained two rusty nails fixed in a rough piece of wood. As a prisoner of war, her husband had gathered the meat bones thrown out by the cook, and with a piece of wood and nails collected from the trash, carved the beautiful vase and napkin holders. Thus he embraced death in his own dignified way.

With a spirit of humble dignity, Jesus endured verbal and physical abuse. Roman governor Pilate had him whipped. Jesus' clothes were stripped, his hands tied behind him, his body secured to a post, his back bent double. A leather thong,

studded with sharpened pieces of bone or lead pellets, was used to give him 40 lashes, lashes that reduced backs to raw flesh, lashes that often sent victims into unconsciousness, lashes that could produce death with no need for crucifixion.

Soldiers took Jesus to their barracks, ridiculed him, beat him up as a deluded rabbi claiming to be king. They placed him at the center of four marching soldiers, paraded him through the streets, made him carry a beam for his cross, nailed him to a cross, displayed a board with the charges against him, and gambled away his outer garment.

Jesus suffered an agonizing death on the cross, crying out in Aramaic the words, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” He was given cheap wine to ease his suffering, before breathing his last. In the final moments of death, Matthew’s gospel writer tells us the temple curtain, keeping all but the high priest from the holy of holies, was torn in two, implying that access to God was opened to all through the holy compassion Jesus advocated. Even those who had suffered and already died were brought to new life through this equal access to God. God was no longer to be hid behind a temple cult, controlled by authorities and sanctioned sacrifices. God was to be for everybody, even for the Roman soldiers who acknowledged Jesus’ specialness as a child and son of God.

There are questions raised by Jesus suffering death. What is such a suffering death to mean for us today? Many people quickly reply that it means substitutionary sacrifice. This is the assumed answer given over hundreds years by Western church tradition. But the idea of substitution is really not a New Testament idea. It is an idea that comes 1,000 years after Jesus, from an archbishop of Canterbury, a monk and theologian named St. Anselm. St. Anselm believed we sin and dishonor God, that God’s justice demands appropriate punishment, that humans cannot restore God’s honor, and that only a divine-human being can substitute for us as a victim subjected to violence.

Such an idea raises basic questions. Can we really ignore the total life of Jesus and his teaching by focusing almost solely on his violent death as the core of the Christian faith? Why would a good God plan or allow the purest of all human beings to die in such a way? And if God had it all planned out, would not Jesus’ killing be child abuse to the nth degree on the part of a divine father? And if God and Jesus knew Jesus would be resurrected anyway, what was there about his death that was truly a sacrifice?

We would do well to reflect on the words of British writer Michael Northcott. He says, “If the central event of the Christian story of divine salvation is about violent death, then it would not be surprising if over their history Christians had not begun to copy and act out this violent death, in their relations with people of other faiths, and in their punishment of criminals and heretics.”

And this is has happened in much of Christianity, for based on the passion accounts in the later gospel of John, and expressed in plays like the Oberammergau passion play performed from the 16th century on, traditional Christianity has portrayed all in the Jewish crowds crying out for Jesus’ crucifixion. In reality, it was the crowds that protected Jesus, rather than calling for his crucifixion; and, as Jesus scholar John Dominic Crossan suggests, it was probably only a small crowd of about a dozen or so men who cried out for the crucifixion of Jesus, crying out so that their own leader Barabbas could be freed.

Such an all-in-the-Jewish-crowds distortion has led to terrible anti-Semitism, massacres of Jews, and even the holocaust. It has also led to the idea that we are all responsible for Jesus’ suffering as we nail Jesus to the cross by our betrayals and sins. This clears the path for the crowning conclusion that only Jesus can substitute for us, to save us from the punishment we deserve at God’s hands.

The New Testament certainly highlights Jesus’ suffering as a sacrifice, but does not portray his suffering as a substituting sacrifice to pacify the justice of a finger shaking, eternally judging God. It was this misconstrued idea that led one little girl to say, “Mommy, I love Jesus, but I hate God.” This idea is an attack on the very character of God.

Whatever Jesus did through suffering, it grew out of his desire to share in the truth of a loving God who wants us to live beyond empire violence, beyond religious discrimination, and beyond political injustice. The substitutionary idea ignores the fact that the New Testament uses, not one, but multiple images to talk of Jesus’ suffering death. The presence of multiple images in the New Testament is kind of like going to a memorial service today, and seeing on a table a display of photos taken of the person we want to remember and celebrate. Each picture offers an angle of that person’s life, but does not give the complete essence of that life. In the New Testament there are multiple photos or images of Jesus’ suffering death.

There is the image of Jesus as the *summarizer*, one who summarizes and re-enacts all of human history. There is the image of Jesus as the *victor*, one who gives us victory over the powers of this world and any world beyond.

There is the image of Jesus as the *deifier*, one who shows us how to see ourselves adopted as God's children and thus made divine. There is the image of Jesus as the *reconciler*, one who helps us see God as a loving friend. There is the image of Jesus as the *example* of spiritual transformation, one who shows us how to recreate life into a gift to be offered in sacrifice to God. Sacrifice means "to make something sacred by giving it up."

It is this last image that I believe is the most crucial one in interpreting Jesus' death. Did not Jesus say in Mark 8:43-35, "You must forget yourself, carry your cross, and follow me. For if you want to save your own life, you will lose it; but if you lose your life for me and for the gospel, you will save it." In keeping with this teaching, we are to be a people who, just like Jesus, choose to offer our lives up in sacrifice, in order to make them sacred in transformation through God.

Lecturer and preacher Tex Sample tells of the summer he worked on a pipe-pulling crew for a seismograph operation in Mississippi at the pay of 35 cents an hour. The operation drilled holes about 250 feet deep and exploded dynamite to see if any oil was in the vicinity. As an 18 year old, Tex worked with an African-American man named Jim, and went by the holes after the blasting to pull up the pipes. It was hard work, especially in the Mississippi heat.

One morning when they got ready to take off in their truck from the service station where it was parked overnight, they found the water can had been stolen. As the bright one, Tex made the boss decision to stop at a store later for drinks. Jim didn't say a word, but went to the back of the station and returned with a rusty syrup can filled with tepid water from a faucet by the gas pumps. The water had flecks of rust and an oily stain floating on top.

They drove 15 miles east to the first hole. After the work of that hole, Jim blew rust flecks and oil stain off the can, and took a long slow drink. There were no stores for drinks, and the day got hotter and hotter. Tex wasn't going to let Jim outwork him, and was not about to drink from that syrup can. But he began to experience heat exhaustion around 10:00am, having had nothing to drink since breakfast. After another hole, Jim took the can and drank about a third, saying nothing. Tex looked for stores and creeks. There were none. He started feeling woozy and in danger of heat stroke. He was a smart white boy preparing to enter LSU that fall, a boy who had never knowingly drunk from the same glass or anything else with a black person. He looked over at Jim. "Uh, Jim, could I . . .

can I . . . would you mind if I . . . uh . . . had . . . a . . . a drink from your can?”
“No, suh, Boss, help yo’self.”

To Tex it looked like the finest vessel of water he had ever seen, and with the bread they later found at a store, he realized he had shared a communion far holier than anything he had ever experienced in church. Tex went on to live in a world with many walls, racial and otherwise. But at the top of every wall he saw an old syrup can. He thought of Jim, who, without a word, had offered him the sacrifice of rusty, oil stained water. And he thought of Jesus, who with few words, offered himself as a living sacrifice of love.

Whatever else the suffering death of Jesus means, it means that he offered his life to God as a sacrifice, a life made sacred by an intentional giving up of all in the truth of holy love. We are called to do the same, to walk in Jesus’ footsteps, even when they lead to a cross. We are called to live out Paul’s words in Romans 12:1, “So then, my friends, because of God’s great mercy to us I appeal to you: offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to service and pleasing to God. This is the true worship you should offer.”