

### What Makes this Friday Good?

Charles Schultz created many memorable *Peanuts* cartoons. In one of my favorites, Charlie Brown comments on the classic western movie *Shane*. The hero, a lonely drifter with a mysterious past, rides into a community of homesteaders struggling under the thumb of a villainous cattle baron. Shane wipes out the bad guys in a gunfight that saves the town but leaves him mortally wounded. He rides off alone into the sunset, while a little boy cries after him, “Shane! Shane! Come back!” Charlie Brown laments that, no matter how many times he watches the movie, Shane never comes back. Charlie Brown concludes with a heartfelt, “Rats!”

I sometimes feel the same way about Jesus’s crucifixion. We all know this story. Our lectionary gives us at least two opportunities to hear it every year. Logically, I know the plot line will never change, but I can’t help wishing otherwise. Just this one time, couldn’t Judas remain loyal to Jesus? Couldn’t the Sanhedrin relent, or at least give Jesus a fair trial? Couldn’t Pilate show a little mercy? Couldn’t Mary and the other women find an advocate, maybe Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea, to defend Jesus? Couldn’t the crowd tell Pilate, “Jesus hasn’t done anything wrong, and we are *not* going to call for his crucifixion. Let Jesus go.” Just once, couldn’t the prison guards be less vicious? Couldn’t the disciples stand beside Jesus at the Cross, even if they aren’t able to rescue him? Couldn’t we find out what blessed things might have happened if anyone, and I do mean *anyone*, had stood up and bravely spoken out for mercy and decency as Jesus was being persecuted and murdered?

The answer, of course, is no. The Crucifixion happened as it happened. Although the evangelists differ here and there in their telling of this painful tale, the fundamental facts never change. Through his efforts to bring the Kingdom of God closer and clean up corruption in the Temple, Jesus infuriated the head priest, Caiaphas, and his cronies. One of Jesus’s most trusted

friends decided to sell him out. Theologians have tried to figure out what motivated Judas for centuries, but the Gospels only tell us that the devil made him do it. From there, the narrative spirals downward into a tragic, poisonous stew of anger, scorn, violence, self-justification, cowardice, bad choices, missed opportunities for mercy, and the apparent triumph of hatred, rage, and monstrous evil.

Earlier this week, Bishop Sutton preached on the Crucifixion to a chapel filled with clergy who came together to renew our ordination vows. He pointed out that everyone in this story ended up at the foot of the Cross. The Roman Empire was there, cruelly asserting its dominion over a conquered people. The religious leaders were there, making sure that their interpretation of sacred law won the day. The people of Jerusalem were there, those who believed in Jesus, those who mocked him, and those who just came for the show. The Roman soldiers were there, inflicting unspeakable pain because they were “just doing their job,” gambling for Jesus’s clothing to eke out a little profit along the way. The disciples had fled, but their absence was so palpable that they were effectively there. The women who supported Jesus were there, helpless to act in a world dominated by masculine brutality. His mother was there, weeping as her firstborn son suffered. Every human emotion, every sinful deed, every ugly impulse was there, along with a very few noble gestures and acts of heartbroken love. The whole world was present at the foot of Jesus’s Cross. The whole world still is today.

No single person made the Crucifixion happen; it took many people, enforcing or yielding to power, indulging personal weaknesses, and refusing or passively failing to buck the system, to bring the Son of God to a grisly death. The story of this day is the story of how humankind tried to kill our God. How in heaven’s name can we possibly call this Friday “good”?

Religious historians offer various theories about the origins of the day's name. Some think the name is a corruption of "God's Friday." Fiona MacPherson, senior editor at the Oxford English Dictionary, told the BBC that the adjective traditionally refers to "a day or season observed as holy by the church." The BBC reports that the *Baltimore Catechism* - the standard Catholic school textbook in the U.S. from 1885 to the 1960s - explains that Good Friday is good because Christ "showed His great love for man, and purchased for him every blessing." I've heard that explanation many times, and it troubles me. The idea that the Father tallied up every transgression of his fallen children, then let those children murder his dear Son to pay off their debt of sin has never rung true to me. What God who loved his Son would demand his death to buy salvation for such broken beings? I'm grateful to have been saved, but I'm not worth the price Jesus paid for me. Perhaps you feel the same way. So, let's explore another possibility.

Father Richard Rohr suggests that Jesus is a mirror, reflecting the Father's divinity in a way to which people can relate. Jesus also reflects us back to ourselves, showing us our virtues and failings in the way we relate to him. A few people behaved like saints on that first Good Friday: Mary, Jesus's mother, and the women who comforted her; the disciple - probably John - who welcomed Mary as his own mother; Simon of Cyrene, who bore the burden of Jesus's cross for him; Veronica, who gave Jesus water and wiped his face with her veil as he stumbled toward his execution. Most of the people in this tale behaved abominably. On Good Friday, Jesus reflected humanity's worst qualities back to us. It's almost unbearable to contemplate them, and none of us can be sure we would have been among the saints on that awful day.

Therein, paradoxically, lies the goodness of Good Friday. It shows us the very worst that humankind is capable of, then proves that God loves us anyway. Although many illustrious theologians, Saint Paul among them, have emphasized that Jesus was sacrificed to pay for our

sins, the greatest good of Good Friday may not be the sacrifice or the payment, but the love that motivated them both. Dying a hideous death at our hands, Jesus shows us that nothing will ever turn God's heart against us. No matter how flawed we are, no matter what mistakes we make, no matter what we do or leave undone, God loves us. And that is very good news indeed.

But with that good news comes great responsibility. God has placed his heart in our hands. That means we can break it. Although there are some who think God can't suffer, the Crucifixion proves otherwise. As Jesus was suffering on the Cross, I believe that his Father and ours was suffering in Heaven. The Father not only had to watch his beloved Son be murdered, he had to watch his other beloved children murder him. It must have been devastating. But maybe we can help heal God's broken heart as well. We make mistakes because we're fallen, but we don't have to withdraw from the protective circle of God's love when we do. We can repent and return to God as many times as we must. And if we remember how much God loves us, perhaps that can inspire us to love God back, not as a tit-for-tat transaction, but because he deserves it, and love is good for us. Perhaps we can try to delight God once in a while. Jesus said that whatever we do for the least among us, we do for him. There are plenty of people out there who need love and service. What we give to them, we give to Jesus, and everyone benefits.

Unlike Shane, Jesus *is* coming back. Humanity did a vile thing when we tried to send him away, but we can do a better job of honoring his memory and welcoming him when he returns. This is a day for somber reflection on humankind's capacity for evil, and it's a day to remember that Jesus suffered at our hands because he allowed it out of love. Jesus has shown us just how bad we can be. He has also shown us what goodness looks like. We can't be perfect as he was perfect, but we can learn from his love and forbearance and become a little more worthy of the love that he showers so ceaselessly upon us. And that's really, really good news. *Amen.*