

The Passion

By: Penny Holste

April 13, 2014. Why did Jesus have to suffer and die? Some answer that question by saying now God understands how it feels to be human, understands our fears, our pains. Pastor Penny suggests though that maybe it was simply to demonstrate for us God's unequivocal love.

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We begin this morning in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I think it's safe to say that most of us like to be in control. We like to have control over the TV remote, over our checkbooks, over our schedules. We like to decide who we want to be friends with. We like to decide what to wear. (Quite a lot of criticism when the Ballpark Village had a dress code, I noticed a few weeks ago.) We want to control things ourselves.

I was struck as I read that Passion story in the Book of Matthew, the last week of Jesus' life, how much of that week Jesus seemed to be in control. It was more like he was the director and the actor of a play. He choreographed the entry into Jerusalem. He organized the celebration of the Passover, which became the Last Supper. He knew what would happen before it happened. He knew who would desert him, who would betray him, who would deny him. He knew when he would die and how he would die and who would kill him. It seemed very much like he was coolly marching through that week and everything was under control — until we get to the Garden of Gethsemane, until we get to the prayer scene in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he was praying to the Father.

Now if you read the story in Matthew, it's not at all like the pictures where he is calmly kneeling before a large rock looking up to heaven, with a beam of light coming down, and his hands in a prayer pose. In Matthew, he throws himself on the ground and begins to beg the Father if there is any other way that this can happen. "Spare me. But not my will, but your will, Father. Your will, Father, be done." And from that moment on it seems as though Jesus abdicated his control. He didn't protest when they arrested him. He didn't speak in his own defense before the high priest Caiaphas, or the governor Pilate. He let them bind him and carry him from place to place like an animal. He let them strip him and torture him and humiliate him, and finally crucify him. It is so much like the words we hear in Philippians, apparently an ancient hymn in the Christian church. I like the words in the RSV: "Christ was in the form of God, did not count equality a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, and came in the form of a slave. And found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on the cross."

But why? Maybe that was his question in Gethsemane: why. "Why, Father, does it have to be this way?" That was a question we had in Confirmation class last week. Why did Jesus have to suffer and die? The answer we always give is: to save us from our sins. But God is God. It could have been done in a different way. Some will answer that question, of why Jesus had to suffer and die, by saying now God understands how it feels to be human, understands our fears, our pains. But God created us. We are creatures created by God. Surely God understands our hearts. No, I think maybe one of the best reasons we can think of to explain why Jesus had to go through what he went through is simply to demonstrate for us, unequivocally, God's love. Because when Jesus went through this he sacrificed himself, he did what was unnecessary and hard, and by going through this pain for us, though we didn't deserve it, God is trying to drown out all those voices of violence that we hear in the world. By giving us this display of amazing love, God is trying to drown out the voices within us that tell us we can't be

forgiven or that we will never forgive someone else. By this amazing display of unmerited love, God is drowning out the fears in our hearts, the fears of what may lie ahead, the fear of being alone, the fear of death.

You know, I think we have typically said that the most amazing miracle that Christians understand — the thing that sets us apart from others — is the miracle that we'll celebrate next Sunday on Easter, when we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. But I would venture to say that maybe a greater miracle than that is what happened on Good Friday. Because in that amazing love, Jesus — God — convinced us unequivocally that God loves us more than God loves himself. That is truly a miracle, and what a blessing to know it.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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