

THE BEAUTY OF SELF-SACRIFICE
Good Friday, April 10, 2009
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Several years ago, I read this very same reading for worship and after I finished I looked up at the silent yet reflective group. “Beautiful,” said the woman in the first row, as she broke the silence. “Beautiful.”

How could a story with so much violence be beautiful? A story that includes an inquisition followed by flogging, mocking, striking? An innocent man who is killed by the harsh, long, drawn out death of crucifixion? There is the breaking of legs and the piercing of the side of the dead. It’s a graphic scene and one that certainly stirs up all kinds of emotions and adjectives...but beautiful???

The Passion has been the subject of so many powerful works of art throughout history. I remember a painting, title and artist lost, that seemed to be a very realistic portrayal of the scene of Christ’s death. There was the pain and anguish in the faces of the women who sat by Jesus’ feet. There was the pale-bluish tone of the skin of the three men who are crucified. And there was the deviousness; smugness on the faces of the Roman guards who played a game on a shield on the ground, a game that would decide who would get Jesus’ clothing. The painting was crude in some ways, accurate according to biblical tradition, but it certainly was not pretty.

So where is the beauty in the Passion narrative? It is not in details of the scene, be they through words or visual art. And if we consider the cast of characters, it is not there either: a traitor named Judas, who sells out his friend, gives up his life for a bag of gold. There’s Peter, who denies his mentor, who spares his own life while

sacrificing that of a man he loved and followed. There's Pilate the Roman governor, who in this version of the Passion story appears to want to save Jesus. He gives the crowd opportunities to change their minds and spare Christ. He gives Christ the chance to tell his side of the story. But in the end, Pilate too saves himself. Afraid of appearing to be for Jesus and against Caesar, to give up his social status and security, he hands Jesus over and walks away as an accomplice. It's a grim group.

One might say, well the beauty comes later. We have not heard the whole story. Christ rises from the dead, is saved and life wins the battle over death. While this is true and yes, a beautiful image, I do not think that is what the lady meant when she said the story was beautiful.

No, the beauty in the Passion story lies in the overarching theme of love and self-sacrifice. Christ was so passionate in his love for humanity and God that he gave up his life for ours. God was so passionate for us that God gave God's only son. It's the ultimate gift of self-sacrifice...laying down one's life for another. To love someone that much, that completely, that passionately...that is beautiful! It is something that Pilate could not do, nor Judas, nor Peter, Christ's good friend. And I think that if we are honest, had we been in Peter's shoes, had we been given Peter's dilemma, we would have made the same decision...saving ourselves first.

Self-sacrifice is something we humans are faced with on large and small scales almost daily. We can condemn what Pilate, Judas and Peter did almost 2000 years ago, but the fact is we still play a part in the death of Jesus in our world today. Each time we hurt one another, are selfish, lie, cheat, judge, we play a part. We do things

that are not pretty or kind, that hurt and perhaps even harm others. We are not the healers nor do we exercise acts of forgiveness, patience, love and compassion in the ways Jesus' demonstrated.

Now this is not an easy message. But Good Friday, the anniversary of Christ's death, is not an easy day. However, we cannot simply gloss over Jesus' death, a death we all continue to take a part of. We cannot simply move on to the brightness and glory of Easter without remembering this important time in our living history.

"What is the truth?" Pilate asks. Good Friday is an opportunity for us to look in the mirror and to face who we truly are. We can admit our roles and choose to follow Christ. With the death of our old ways and selves, we can experience the beauty of Christ's self-offering, a glorious new life.