

John 12:20-33

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Why did Jesus die for you?

Chances are, in some form or fashion, you have asked yourself this question, or had it asked of you. And my guess is, at least for those of you that have been around the church long enough, you've heard plenty of answers.

During the Season of Lent, we talk about this even more than usual, knowing what is coming around the bend. Lent is not intended to be such a somber time, but we can't help it knowing what is about to happen to Jesus. Every time he opens his mouth, we worry it may be his last word to us.

Out of compassion, I won't go into all the classical theories of "atonement" for you this morning, the many ways Christians have tried to explain what happened that Friday at Golgotha, but I do think it is an important set of questions for us to ask ourselves.

What did Jesus' death on the cross accomplish? Why do we hang this cross, this symbol of brutal execution, in the midst of an otherwise beautiful and orderly sanctuary?

I was blessed to be brought up by two churches, my grandmother's Southern Baptist flock and my family's United Methodist church. They both talked a lot about Jesus, and they both talked a lot about the cross.

Sometimes they used the same words, like "debt" and "salvation" and "forgiveness." But they spoke about it differently enough that I was seriously confused bouncing back and forth between Sunday Schools.

The trouble with faith is that the deeper you go, the more splendid the mystery. The more answers you find, the more questions you will have.

And today's scripture readings might make you feel as if you are bouncing back and forth. They use so many powerful images for why Jesus did what he did.

In the Old Testament reading from Jeremiah, God promises to make a new covenant, a promise that God will not expect people to behave according to any external set of rules and regulations, but that God will write the law on our hearts. At the side entrance to Neu Chapel, there is a stained glass window of a heart, with numbers written on it, depicting this very passage.

During Jeremiah's time, the Israelites have lost their homeland, lost their Temple, lost their way of life. They are desperate to know how they can be faithful without the things that made up their faith before. They want to know how to learn obedience without the law, without God's promises that they took for granted for so long.

God's answer, through Jeremiah, is to say that there will be a day when you won't need the Temple. When you won't need the rules and regulations of religion. When you won't need to guess about God or feel like you're praying into thin air.

Because God will write God's promises upon your heart.

Eugene Peterson translates the end of this passage, where God is speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, to say, “They will no longer go around setting up schools to teach each other about God. They’ll know me firsthand, the dull and the bright, the smart and the slow. I’ll wipe the slate clean for each of them. I’ll forget they ever sinned!”

In the letter to the Hebrews, the writer says that Christ “learned” obedience to God through what he suffered. I’m not sure I’m comfortable with a Savior that has anything to learn. I would prefer a messiah who has a script, and knows exactly what is coming. A Savior who is in control.

But that is exactly the mystery Hebrews is trying to wrap our heads around, that Christ was made perfect through obedience, and that Christ’s obedience, through the worst stuff the world could throw at him, changed the world.

In today’s Gospel reading, Andrew and Philip come up to him and tell him that some Greeks, some Gentiles, want to see him.

His fame has spread beyond merely the Jewish world. People are talking about him who don’t know a thing about Moses or Jonah or Esther. Outsiders want to meet Jesus, and so Philip and Andrew bring their request. “Is that okay? Will you talk with them?”

But Jesus is in another world. “The hour has come. The seed must die. To save your life you must lose it.”

Philip and Andrew ask a very simple question: Do you want to talk to them or not? But their simple question unravels a man who is counting the breaths he has left. “My soul is troubled. But what can I say, ‘Father, save me from this hour?’”

For the most part, the Jesus we meet in John’s gospel has it all together, especially compared to the Jesus of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In Matthew and Mark, the only words Jesus manages to speak from the cross are “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Hardly an inspirational rally cry.

Contrast that to John, where Jesus has the presence of mind on the cross to arrange for his friend John and his mother Mary to comfort one another, and to announce that his life is over, “It is finished.”

When they come to arrest Jesus in the garden, the other Gospels depict a reluctant and heartbroken Jesus. In the Gospel of John, the soldiers ask, “Are you Jesus?” When Jesus replies, “I am,” all the soldiers are knocked to the ground.

As John paints his picture of Jesus, he focuses on the strength, on the choices, on the almost superhuman characteristics of Jesus that make him different.

Whenever someone tells me that John is their favorite gospel, my immediate thought is always that they must need a Messiah who is not like them. Who has it all together, who is unafraid and composed, who is more God than human. I get that.

After all, it would be easier for us to watch if he acted numb to what's about to happen to him, if it seemed like he didn't feel it. We do so much better around people that mask their pain well—we tend to reward that.

If he marched into it all like a madman or a superhero and didn't seem to already feel the nails that would pierce his flesh or the hatred that would fill his ears, we wouldn't have so much compassion fatigue.

But even in the Gospel of John, he seems afraid. Troubled. With every step closer to Jerusalem, his feet become heavier. The path becomes steeper. The stakes get higher.

Even before the cross has been built, even before the charges have been fabricated, he has begun to die. And this first death may be the more painful of the two, the more lonely of the two, because this is the moment of choice for him. He must *will* every step, knowing that each one brings him closer to the end of this road.

Earlier in this chapter, Mary takes a pound of perfume and washes his feet with her hair. It seems inappropriate, not just because of the wasted perfume and the ridiculous expense but because of the intimacy of it that scares everyone else in the room.

And his response there seems inappropriate: “You will always have the poor, you won't always have me!”

Then he rides into town on a donkey surrounded by the cheering and confused crowd that so desperately wants a hero they are willing to even accept one who looks too much like them and rides not on a stallion but a borrowed donkey.

But he doesn't look like someone who's won a battle or even the lottery, he looks like he is driving the hearse for his own funeral.

And now, when his friends come to tell him that some Greeks want to see him, he can't even hear their request.

“The hour has come. It is time. The seed has to die in order to give life.”

Frankly, none of these passages sound like what I heard in church growing up. Often, the church focuses only on one message of the cross, namely, that we have screwed up and run up a deficit that makes our government's look like Monopoly money.

The debt is too great for us to pay, but someone has to pay it, and so one day Jesus shows up at the cross and does exactly that.

What these scriptures point to, though, is a much richer and more demanding Gospel. If the cross is just about paying for our mistakes, if Jesus just marches to Good Friday in order to pay a bill for us, then frankly, not much changes.

Hear me out on this. If the crucifixion of the Son of God is merely some exchange between God and evil, with Jesus' death as the purchase price, some cosmic event that has no connection to my life or yours, then I'm not sure how it changes my day to day living.

When your parents caught you doing something wrong, chances are, if you were like me, and knew the right words to say, you could maneuver your way out of any major punishment. You knew they wanted to hear you say "I'm sorry."

But deep down, they wanted more than that. They didn't want you to just say the words, they wanted new behavior. They wanted you to learn, they wanted you to change, they wanted your relationship to change.

Do you remember that time you went too far and you could tell how much you hurt them? Do you remember that time you were expecting them to yell at you, but they just looked sad and disappointed and that was the worst punishment of all, because suddenly you wanted to repair the relationship as well?

If the crucifixion is just an excuse for us to say "I'm sorry" to God whenever we ignore that relationship, whenever we sin, then I'm not sure we really get it. Our culture is so obsessed with immediate gratification that we can let that infect our faith as well, trusting that Jesus' pain wipes away all our pain, Jesus' obedience means that we have no need to be obedient ourselves.

But Jesus also calls himself the "way." The path. Jesus' dedication to God is not just a spoon of medicine that takes away any responsibility we might have, it is a bulldozer carving a road through the wilderness so that we might follow suit.

If Jesus is so dedicated to God that he is willing to be obedient even through a cross, not suffering for the sake of suffering but suffering for the sake of love, for the sake of obedience, then there is no telling what that seed will grow when planted in the ground, when that seed is planted in us.

If Jesus loves us so much that he cannot help but cling to God, even though he knows where that might lead, then how can we help but have that law written on our own hearts?

Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

If Jesus had saved his life, gone on a speaking tour, and written some books, there is no telling how long his movement might have lasted—but because he was willing to lose his life, because his message mattered so much to him that he was willing to show people what it meant instead of just telling them about it—his seed bore much fruit, more than it ever did while he was alive. When the hour comes, each of us has a grain of wheat with which to cast our votes...the grain of our lives.¹

As we go further down this Lenten road, as we draw closer to Good Friday, I hope you will take some time every day to think about these last days of Jesus. I hope you will spend some time in prayer dwelling on the mystery of the cross, not seeking simple answers, but pausing in that much more uncomfortable place where we are open to God.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Teaching Sermons on Suffering: God in Pain*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1998. P. 64.

What in your life needs to die so that new life can spread? What gift do you need to plant so that it will grow?

My prayer is that all of us would find ourselves able to cling so fiercely to what matters, despite our fear and uncertainty, that one Easter morning, we will awake to the kind of life that only comes through the cross.