

**10:30 am, Good Friday April 19, 2019
Harrow United Church**

(Portion of the Service)

Assurance of God's Love (responsive)

Here are some words that we all need to hear:

God loves us.

God has always loved us.

God will always love us, no matter what.

We celebrate together that every single one of us is loved by God.

Introduction to the second scripture reading:

In Jesus' time, the obligations under religious law to make sacrifices of animals in the temple had led to the development of a profitable industry. Jesus stood against those practices that he said made the house of prayer into a den of robbers. This incident contributed to the desire of powerful people to have Jesus killed.

Mark 11:15-18

On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: " 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations' ? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.' " The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

The third scripture reading: Luke 23:32-43

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."^[a] And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One."

The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."

There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Learning Time:

I have a simple gold cross, suspended from a fine gold chain. It was a gift from my parents on the occasion of my ordination in 1990. It is safely stored in its little velvet covered box, somewhere in my house. I rarely wear it. I value the gold cross because it was a gift of love, but I am just not one for wearing crosses.

For most of my life I have struggled with the symbol of the cross. I recognize that the women and men of the Church who keep their focus on the cross, and who preach it with such enthusiasm, do so in an effort to give us a loving gift. I can be grateful for the love and intention behind their gift, even as I continue to wrestle with it.

My problem is the package the gift comes in- the theology, or interpretation of the crucifixion that dominates Christianity, at least in our time, and in our part of the world. It goes like this. God made the world, in a very busy week, and set everything in motion. During the making, God kept saying how good it all was. Then something happened, called the "fall". Somehow the order of creation got broken. This is blamed on human disobedience, as described in the Adam and Eve story. Since then, every human, including all new born babies, are marked by original sin.

This original sin was such an offence against the honour and dignity of God that it could not be ignored, forgotten, or forgiven, without a huge price being paid. God is like an angry, proud, corrupt, and judgmental king who holds grudges, and needs to be paid off, so that honour can be restored. The only way this can apparently happen is if a blood sacrifice is made.

In this way of thinking, God who created the universe, and set up all the physical laws and rules by which it operates, could only imagine one way to fix things. Jesus, the Divine Son, had to be put to death, as a necessary sacrifice, to pay the price, restore honour, and erase the mark on our souls.

In this interpretation, nothing else Jesus says or does, not any of his teachings, or miracles, or kindness, or compassion, really matter. The whole point of his earthly existence was to be born, wait for 33 years, and then die on the cross to pay the cosmic debt.

This is the package in which the gift of Good Friday has been wrapped. And even though we are told we should not judge a book by its cover- the information on the outside has caused many people to question if there is anything of value inside. I want to point to some of the basic problems.

The first is the idea that we humans could ever know that much about the mind and heart of God, and that we could with such authority explain both the problem and solution of the whole universe. This leaves no room for mystery, and reduces God's work to one simple transaction- you are loved and forgiven if you accept Jesus. I see how this appeals to our need to have a logical clear answer to everything. We want to make sense of things, so we can feel like we are in control. But honestly, that is an illusion.

The second problem is about God being all powerful. Maybe God is, but if God is all powerful, is this really the only way God could find to solve the problem? Does God really need to act so human-like, and be ruled by pride and honour, and require violence to make things better?

The third problem is about Jesus' death being what God had planned even before Mary gave birth to her child in Bethlehem. This suggests that each step in Jesus' life, and in the lives of everyone around him was planned and programmed, long before they lived and breathed. So Jesus was following God's plan to save us, and so was Judas, and Pontius Pilate, and Herod, and the soldiers who bound and beat Jesus, and who nailed him to the cross, and pierced his side with a spear. Like Hitler's henchmen, they were all just following orders- no worse than that, they were kind of like puppets in a staged drama, and had no real choice, or responsibility for their actions.

This interpretation of the story gives support and justification to the idea that complicated problems can be solved with a simple action. Kill the right person and the problems go away. We know what Hitler was able to do with that kind of logic. It's called scapegoating. Convince people that their problems be solved if we can just get rid of the Jews, or the communists, or the immigrants, or the homosexuals, or the liberals, or the radicals, and you can get away with almost anything.

A writer named Rene' Girard pointed out that almost every culture in the world practices scapegoating. He sees it as a way that people have found to live together, without erupting into total mayhem, anarchy, and murderous destruction. There are always rivalries, jealousies, tensions in a society. Poor versus rich. Old versus young. Powerful versus powerless. Race against race. Dominant culture against minorities. Protestant versus Catholic. Christian versus Muslim.

There is always anxiety and confusion and dissatisfaction about life, and a basic, almost instinctive desire for a simple solution that would solve the problems, or at least provide a vent for all the frustrated energy of our violent urges. The ancient Romans had gladiators in the coliseum. We have the warriors on Hockey Night in Canada. A good blood-letting allows the crowd to vicariously experience the guilty thrill of violence, and then get on with their lives. Think about the soccer hooligans in Europe, and how closely that movement is tied to racism, and the social tensions rooted in poverty and unemployment.

What happens if we question these basic assumptions about God and the universe? What if God is not an angry judge, but is more like the loving parent that Jesus taught about? What if God already loves and accepts us, no matter what? What if the fall, and original sin are just human ideas, and God still sees the whole of creation as good?

What if Jesus' death did not happen to satisfy an external condition- God's judgment of all humanity? What if Jesus was following an internal mission- to live out of love?

One of the things that happens for me when the wrapping is taken off the package, when I can begin to look at the cross without the layers of interpretation that have boxed it in, I can get a glimpse of the love of Jesus. His willingness to enter into suffering, which is such a basic fact of our lives. He knew what it was like to suffer, and to be unfairly treated.

I see a glimpse of God being with us, and never abandoning us, even in the midst of what has been called the tragic sense of life- that not everything is fair, not everything makes sense, and that everything, and everyone who lives, will also suffer, and someday die. We can feel drawn closer to this image of God who is willing to be with us in our hardship, even if God is not offering any quick or easy solution or relief.

What if Jesus submitted to crucifixion not because he “had” to, but because of his understanding of life- that included his belief that dying is not the worst thing that can happen to a person- that it is actually worse to not be who you are? What if Jesus knew God was calling him to live a life in which self-sacrifice might make sense, depending on the situation? What if by submitting to “scapegoating” Jesus was actually shining a light on what a barbaric, manipulative, evil practice it is?

These are questions we would not even be thinking about if the death of Jesus had been the point of the story, and if the crucifixion had been the end of the story. We need Easter. We need the mystery of that morning with the empty tomb. We need the resurrection as God’s way of saying that this is not the point, or the end of the story. There is so much more to the story of God’s love than can fit in that little box we put the cross in. **Amen**