

Abandoned by God
**A Sermon on Phil 2:5-11,
Matt 26:36-46; 27:45-46
Palm/Passion Sunday
April 9, 2017**

Introduction

Today's text brings us face to face with the cross. What does the cross mean to you?

Progressive Christians struggle with that question. We tend to emphasize Jesus as a healer and a wisdom teacher and neglect the cross. Disciples emphasize a table where all are welcome. We avoid singing hymns about the blood of Christ. Substitutionary atonement no longer makes sense to us; it is based on original sin and a medieval code of honor.

Paul can help us. He sees the world through the perspective of a crucified Christ. The risen Lord is the crucified Christ. Paul never lets us forget that. We should thank him for that. Next week we will put up three Easter banners. We will leave up the two banners of Jesus on the cross.

Today I will try to connect the Christ Hymn in Philippians with Matthew's stories of Gethsemane and of the death of Jesus. The theme that joins them together is that Jesus empties himself.

First Move: Jesus Empties Himself

The Christ Hymn in Philippians begins with the humiliation of Jesus and ends with his exaltation.

“He was in the form of a god but empties himself and takes the form of a slave.”

There are many different interpretations of this verse. The early church thought it referred to the pre-existence of Christ. Christ emptied himself of his divinity and became human. Another major interpretation was that Christ was being described as a second Adam. Paul talks about Christ as a second Adam in Romans and it is assumed he is making the same reference here. Instead of obeying God, Adam grasped for the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil so that he could be like God.

The interpretation that made the most sense to me when I preached this text five years ago was that Christ emptied himself of honor. Paul is comparing Christ to Caesar. Paul says that Christ did not regard equality with god as booty to be seized. The Greek word for booty suggests robbery, something that is taken by violence. In Roman theology, the emperors were glorified as gods. The emperors claimed that they brought peace to the world through military victory. When they conquered foreign countries and put down rebellions on the outskirts of the empire, they thought it was a sign that they were favored by the gods. After the Caesars died, the Roman Senate would vote and give them a name as sons of God.

Jesus has a different vision of what God is like. Jesus refuses to act like Caesar. Caesar was always grasping, trying to take more territory, trying to exact tribute from the Jews and the other peoples that the Romans had conquered. The Caesars wanted wealth and power and honor. They thought it made them like the gods.

Jesus emptied himself of honor and took the form of a slave instead of taking the form of an emperor and grasping for more. Romans considered the Jews to be an inferior people, fit only to be slaves. Seneca, a Roman statesman who lived at the same time as Paul, said that Jews were “born for servitude.” By taking the form of a slave, Jesus stood in solidarity with the weakest members of Roman society.

Our study on Wednesday nights of the mystical tradition of the church has led me to believe that a spiritual interpretation is also possible. Christ emptied himself of himself. The NRSV translates the first verse as Jesus humbled himself instead of Jesus emptied himself. That is an interpretation, a good interpretation, but it forecloses the other possibilities. The Greek verb is κενόω, which means to empty. It is where the term kenotic theology comes from; it is a self-emptying theology. That was the theology of the desert fathers and the mystics. They got it from this text. Jesus empties himself and sets aside his own desires. He leaves his own desires and needs behind in a cloud of forgetting and has a naked desire for God. He is obedient to God’s desire even unto death on a cross. When you get yourself out of the way, a whole new world opens up. You notice people and things that were invisible to you before. You can see the world from God’s perspective.

We don’t have to choose between these different interpretations of what Jesus is emptying himself of. The text is deeper if we try to hold them all together. Jesus empties himself and God exalts him for it.

Second Move: Jesus Cries Out in Suffering

We also see Jesus empty himself in Gethsemane and on the cross. We see Jesus as fully human instead of as a god.

He takes his closest disciples with him to Gethsemane: Peter and the two sons of Zebedee. He tells them that his soul is deeply grieved—it could also be translated as deeply pained. He makes a simple request of them: Stay here and keep watch with me in my time of crisis.

Jesus goes ahead a little, falls on his face and prays. This is a very Jewish way of praying. It shows total submission to God. “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass by me; yet not as I desire, but as you desire.” Jesus turns to God and refers to him as My Father in his moment of crisis. The cup is a metaphor for his destiny. Jesus knows that his ministry about the kingdom of God has led him into conflict with the religious and political powers and fears that they will not hesitate to kill him. A spiritual interpretation is also possible: not what I desire, but as you desire. Even at the point of death, Jesus was able to empty himself of his own desires and open himself to God’s desires.

Three times Jesus prays and three times he finds the disciples sleeping. The disciples have already begun to abandon Jesus. They cannot resist their own desire for sleep, even when Jesus has told them of his pain. “The spirit is eager but the flesh is weak.”

The Passion of Christ is intimately linked with his ministry. “Behold the hour has drawn near and the Son of Man is being handed over into hands of sinners.” Jesus had been proclaiming that the kingdom of God has drawn near. Jesus feels abandoned by God. Handed over is the divine passive: God is doing the handing over. Paul uses the same phrase in Romans to say that God hands over the Gentiles to their sins. God washes his hands of them and lets them be consumed by their sins instead of delivering them from their sins.

Jesus calls himself the Son of Man. The Son of Man refers to God’s agent in Daniel 7. He acts for God but he is not a god himself. The Son of Man shows us what it is like to be fully human.

“Behold the one who is handing me over has drawn near.” The NRSV translates the one who is handing me over as the one who is betraying me, or the betrayer. This obscures the double meaning. Again, it is in the passive voice. Jesus could be lamenting that God is handing over him, even though he has been righteous; he has not sinned. Where is God’s righteousness in that?

On the cross, Jesus again is in great pain. He has been abandoned by the male disciples. He has been condemned by the religious and political leaders. He hangs naked on a cross between two bandits. Even the bandits mock him.

He cries out with a great voice, “My God, My God, why did you abandon me?” This is a very Jewish way of responding to tragedy. It is cry of lament. What distinguished the Jews was that when they suffered, they cried out to God.

Jesus is quoting the first line of Psalm 22. A righteous person is crying out to God to vindicate him. All three Synoptic Gospels show Jesus as saying this. He is crying out to God in prayer at his death.

Jesus does not come to terms with his suffering. It is simply there. His cry is not his alone, but the cry of millions of suffering people who feel abandoned by God.

Third Move: Hearing the Cries of Suffering

The title of my term paper in my constructive theology class in seminary was *The Table not the Cross*. I argued that Disciples should embrace the table as the core symbol of our faith instead of the cross. When I made that argument in class, Opio Toure, an African-American legislator, said that if you take away the cross, you don't have anything left in an African American church.

I have come to see that Opio is right. Sometimes it is hard to feel the cross in a Disciples church. Individual people may be suffering and struggle with God's righteousness, but white, middle class people are not suffering as a group. The system does pretty well by them.

It is different in an African-American church. I worshiped several times in George Young's church, Holy Temple Baptist Church, and got to know his congregation. I can feel the cross there. They are suffering just like Jesus did.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer felt the same way. He grew up in a sterile Lutheran church in Germany and didn't feel the cross until he went to seminary at Union Theological Seminary in New York and a classmate took him to Abyssinian Baptist Church, where Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. was the pastor. Bonhoeffer went to worship there every week the rest of the time that he was in seminary. The gospel came alive for him there.

Bonhoeffer wrote from his prison cell, “Only the suffering God can help.” Bonhoeffer was executed in April 1945, just as the Allies were liberating the prison camps.

Jurgen Moltmann also has helped me with the cross. He is a white, European male who wrote one of the first liberation theologies 50 years ago. The cross for Moltmann is about more than individual salvation; it is about identifying with the suffering of people who are oppressed and helping to transform the social system so that it no longer oppresses them. The cross for Moltmann is about participation in our suffering rather than substitution for our sins.

I don't mean to diminish our need for individual salvation. Jesus cries out with people when they are suffering, no matter the cause. Each of us can struggle to see God's righteousness at work in our lives. Sometimes we seem to suffer pain unjustly. Our relationships collapse. Our loved ones die too young. When others are suffering, we can only hope that we will respond as Jesus asked the disciples, Stay near and keep watch with me.

When we are doing social justice work as the church, we must ask ourselves, What is it that we bring to this work as Christians? Where is the cross in all of this?

It is easy for progressives to get caught up in justice work and lose their identity as Christians. We may be working with secular groups or interfaith groups and want to avoid offending them. The danger is that we become nothing more than political activists unless we bring our perspective of the cross to our work.

Mary and I went to a non-violence conference in Santa Fe almost two years ago. It was the first nationwide conference on non-violence. It was organized by John Dear and Pace e Bene. It had wonderful speakers, but I was a little surprised that the conference was mostly secular activists and I was disappointed that there was no worship service and nothing about non-violent spirituality. I asked Dear about this and he said that he couldn't get many clergy members in New Mexico to attend.

We have a double challenge: motivating Christians to engage in justice work and bringing the cross with us when we do.

I have the same concern when I am doing work with VOICE or the Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. If we surrender our Christian identity, we have little to add to the conversation.

We need to hear the cries of people who feel abandoned by God and help those voices be heard. We need to stop worrying about being Smart on Crime. That is looking at criminal justice from a middle-class perspective. How can we make best use of our dollars in the state budget? We should encourage people to be Humane on Crime and hear the stories of people who are being oppressed by the system.

The crucified Christ would be on death row, standing with the people that society judges to be the worst of the worst, the least of these. The crucified Christ would be riding on the boats with the refugees from Libya and Sudan. Our government and the people who got them elected see them as potential terrorists instead of as people fleeing from terrorism.

Our culture encourages us to focus on our self-interest. Our faith calls us to hear the cries of people who feel abandoned by God.

Conclusion

We follow a crucified Christ who emptied himself of honor, of all pretensions of divinity and of all desires to satisfy his self interest. Good Friday is unavoidable for us as disciples. We will suffer ourselves when we put our own interests aside and notice the suffering that is otherwise invisible to us. We will get frustrated that we can't do enough to help them. Then we too can go to God in prayer and ask, "My God, my God, where are you?"

And God will answer on Easter Sunday.

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