

# What does Good Friday mean today?

*(A sermon preached on April 6, 2012 at Sydenham Street United Church by the Rev. Dr. C. Wayne Hilliker, Minister Emeritus, Chalmers United Church)*

Earlier this Good Friday morning, a retired ministerial colleague and friend of mine phoned me from Ottawa. He knew I was preaching at a Good Friday service and suggested that I look at a 'For Better or For Worse' cartoon that had appeared in Friday's newspaper. I did so. In it the mother of young Michael says to her son:

*'Why are you looking so thoughtful, Michael?'*

Michael replies, *'I think it is sad that Jesus died—that's all.'*

Mother then says, *'He had to die, honey. He died to save us all from our sins.'*

To which Michael says, *'But Mom! I haven't done anything!!!'*

This cartoon certainly conveys a common understanding of the reason Jesus died. However, at this Good Friday service, you and I are being invited to revisit our understanding of this day. It is a good question to ask ---What does Good Friday mean for us today?

I do not believe that I am alone in recognizing the need to connect with an understanding of the death of Jesus that doesn't contradict the nature of the love of God that we have come to know through the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. But when we head in that direction, it may mean for some of us, to renounce other particular meanings attached to the death of Jesus. Is renounce, too harsh a word? I don't think so. Not if we understand the specific meaning of the word 'renounce' when it is used in playing cards. For there, 'renounce' means *'to be unable to follow suit and be forced to play a card from a different suit'*. For us on this day, *'playing a card from a different suit'* really means choosing to try on a different lens in viewing Good Friday.

In thinking about my own early understanding of Good Friday, my mind takes me back to the first sermon I ever preached in my home congregation of Montreal West United. I had just completed my first year of theology. Wanting to impress the congregation (as well as my parents who were present) with the breadth of my theological knowledge that I had learned at the feet of Donald Mathers, my professor of Systematic Theology at Queen's, I chose as my topic 'The meaning of the Cross'. In the sermon, I examined some of the traditional understandings of the Cross:

- ...as a sacrifice for our sins,
- ... as an appeasement of God's wrath,
- ...as a victory over the evil powers
- ...and as the ultimate example of self-giving love.

The sermon lasted 45 minutes! A retired McGill philosophy professor happened to be in the congregation. As he was leaving the service, he said to me—

*“Mr. Hilliker, I came here anticipating some food for thought, but I never expected an avalanche.”*

What is clear from my beginner’s eagerness and arrogance, is that the historical unfolding of atonement theories in Christianity has resulted in distinctively different understandings of the cross. Instead of a single teaching on Jesus’ death, we have a number of theories that have been given different weight from denomination to denomination and even from congregation to congregation. Some of these interpretations have found a lasting resting place in the hearts and minds of believers. But other people have sometimes viewed these same interpretations as a distortion of the true nature of God.

When you stop to think about it, on Good Friday, we are really pondering two events. We might even say two crosses. First of all, there is the cross that speaks of the historical event of Jesus’ crucifixion. But there is also the cross that symbolizes the theological interpretation of that event. That is, there is Good Friday then and there is Good Friday now. But what does *then* have to do with *now*?

When we gather for public worship on Good Friday, I think it is true to say that we encounter two things: We bring our individual private truths — ie. the meaning we personally attach to Jesus’ death. Frequently, this private truth is at odds with the public truth conveyed through the traditional Good Friday hymns that we sing, the prayers that are offered, the anthems that are sung, or the sermons that are sometimes preached. When these clashes of meaning occur, we can end up leaving the service with an unsettling sense of disconnect. It may have already happened to some of you right here, right now!

The truth is that no one can fully understand the meaning of the cross. Even the symbol by itself can have a transformative effect.

A woman that I know was sexually abused by her father when she was less than five years old. While this horror was still continuing, she came across a painting of a man suffering on a cross. It was a picture of the crucifixion. But at this point in her life, she had never even heard of Jesus, let alone God. However, as she fixed her eyes on this haunting image, a sudden awareness came upon her that she was not alone in her suffering. She remembers how tightly she held on to that picture, for it empowered her to endure the unspeakable.

Helen Waddell has written an engaging biography of the medieval theologian Peter Abelard. In it she describes an exchange that takes place between Abelard and his friend Thibault. The two are conversing outside when they are suddenly interrupted by the anguished cry of a rabbit caught in a trap in a nearby woods.

Thibault rushes over and frees the bedraggled little animal, only to have it expire in his arms. This incident starts the friends talking about God's place in the world's suffering. When their discussion turns to the crucifixion, Thibault points to a fallen tree beside them that has been sawn through the middle.

*“That dark ring there, it goes up and down the whole length of the tree.  
But you only see it where it is cut across.  
That is what Christ's life was: the bit of God that we saw,”* he says.

In other words, in Jesus, in his life, his teachings, his parables, we see more clearly what God is like. We need to avoid what someone has named as ‘Airport theology’ in which the life of Jesus is reduced to an ‘arrival’ and a ‘departure’ with nothing of significance in-between.

The claim of the first followers of Jesus was not that he was God, but rather that he revealed the fullness of God at work in a human being. We can point to Jesus then as the one who came to satisfy our yearnings to know who God is and how God is toward us. From such awareness, other things follow.

For me, it means rejecting any interpretation of Good Friday in which God becomes a different-natured God because of Jesus' death on a cross.

It means turning away from any suggestion that God had to wait until Jesus died on the cross in order to be a forgiving God.

It means refusing to view God as some kind of child-abuser who arranges the death of one child for the benefit of the others.

Somewhere I heard it said, *“God does not dispense forgiveness. Rather, we live in the eternal mercy and forgiveness of God.”* Therefore, just as a dark ring of a tree is visible not only where a tree is cut through but runs the whole length of the trunk, so too can we rightly affirm with Thibault,

*“We think God is like that forever, because it happened once with Christ.”*

Like all symbols, the cross evokes more than explains. For those suffering as a result of human sin, it is a symbol of resistance. For those experiencing something horrible, it is the symbol of the embracing assurance that we do not suffer alone. For those in need of direction, it is the call to be at the service of humankind at the expense of prestige and power.

However, It is also the testimony of holy scripture that it was in the presence of Jesus, that people saw themselves in God's own light. Although, we were not literally there 2000 years ago, what happened way back then, goes on happening now.

In the presence of Jesus' integrity, our own duplicity is made manifest. In the presence of his fierce love for God and for us, our own hardness of heart is revealed. In the presence of his own willingness to face the unknown, our own fear of death is exposed. And sometimes, in his presence, we do everything we can to extinguish his light.

No, we were not there...but in the deepest sense, we are there, at the cross, pondering its meaning, and living the question 'were you there?'

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