

**Good Friday Sermon 2006**  
**“Good Friday and the Fourth Century”**  
**Rev. Linda Yates, M. Div.**

In this society of instant gratification, of buy now, pay later, this world of the big red “easy” button of the Staples advertisement where your most complex problem can be solved with a slam of the easy button - it is so easy to skip right over the crucifixion and go straight to the resurrection. It is as if somehow, we can have any kind of relationship of integrity and intimacy, whether that is with God or with other humans, without going through some pretty hard slogging. This is not possible, as you know. We have to do the slogging. Too many church people attend the “Rah! Rah! Jesus-is-in-our-parade” service of Palm Sunday and hope to skip over all the death stuff and go right into the “Rah! Rah! Jesus-has-risen-from-the-dead” service of Easter Sunday. I am glad therefore to see you all here attending this Good Friday Service. You have not pressed the big red easy button of faith.

If we can not hear about Christ’s suffering then our own suffering can not be consoled. If we can not hear about Jesus’ agony then we can not console the world. Most importantly it becomes too easy then to decide not to hear about the current day crucifixion of others around our planet, and indeed the crucifixion of the planet itself and how we contribute to that. We have to hear the whole dreadful story and we have to hear it together within community because it is too hard to bear alone and too much is at stake for us and for the world if we interpret the story incorrectly.

Having lived with a diagnosis of terminal cancer for a number of years, (which turned out to be false), and having buried many people after walking with them through to their deaths, I’ve come to appreciate this day. You know, when you are a minister it’s all nicely theoretical until you are faced with your own death. That’s when the rubber hits the road, when you wonder if all that stuff you’ve been saying from Sunday to Sunday can be true. I came to the conclusion that we have some concepts around this day and the sacrifice of Christ that we need to unpack as a faith community together through discussion. Let us begin the unpacking.

The most common explanation that we hear about Jesus’ death on a cross, if you were to stand on the street and poll people is something like “Jesus died for our sins.” Well, what does that mean? There are a couple of ways we can plumb the depths of this idea. At the root of this thought is the concept of original sin. This idea proposes that because Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit of the Garden of Eden and were then kicked out then we are all born with the stain of this original sin which must be removed by some kind of sacrifice. It is actually a very late idea in the history of the church. Augustine, a church father who lived from 391-430 AD was the first guy to articulate this concept. It is an idea that would have been quite alien, I think, to Jesus, his followers and to the church of the first couple of centuries. In fact it was many centuries before the Christian Church grabbed onto this idea and used it to completely restructure the theological foundations of the church and the social structures of society. The fourth century after Christ died would prove to be a tumultuous time in the church from which we are still recovering.

From Augustine on, the church's theology was high jacked onto this one line of thought of sin and sacrifice. Expanded it can be called the substitution theory – the idea that we are all sinful and a huge sacrifice must be made to fix the justice imbalance so Jesus took all those sins upon himself and traveled to the cross. At it's most simple, basic level, which unfortunately is the most common, it has the capacity to turn God into a hang-man God. In other words story goes like this. God is like a strict western frontier justice kind of judge. Someone has murdered a man in town. The culprit is arrested and he appears before the judge. The guilty party is convicted and it is decided that he must hang. Fine. The scaffold is built the man is about to be hanged and a voice comes from the crowd. This person then steps forward and says maybe the criminal should be forgiven and allowed to start over. The judge objects because there is an issue of justice to be dealt with. The judge says "We're set up for a hangin' and there's a gonna be a hangin'." Finally the person from the crowd says "Okay. I will take the place of the guilty man and you can hang me." The judge says, "Great. I don't care who it is - As long as someone is hanged today. Justice must be done." Now we might feel good about the person who substituted himself for the guilty party. We might even feel good about considering ourselves like the guilty party. But do you see what it does to God? Do you see how, within this theory God is turned into a petulant, monstrously mean and petty God. Please don't do that to God.

I've done an awful lot of thinking, and reading and praying about suffering. In reading C.S. Lewis' explanation of suffering in his book *Surprised by Joy* I was astonished to find at the base of C. S. Lewis's faith the idea that God gave Lewis's wife Joy cancer so that he could learn humility and compassion. This is a remarkable testament to both egocentrism and a theology of suffering that is very, very dangerous. Which one of you would inject your children with cancer cells or the AIDS virus just so your children would learn a good life lesson? If human beings did that, we as part of a caring society would arrest them and take their children into a place of safety. We are all children of God. We need to remember that God is NOT a child abuser. Please don't make God into one by saying God inflicts people with crushing blows.

If we have a Christ centred faith then we are to understand that Jesus exemplified more than any other human being, who God is. Did Jesus ever make someone sick in the gospels to teach them a lesson? Did Jesus ever kill anyone? No. Of course not. Jesus was about the healing of disease and the relief of suffering which then shows us plainly what God is about. It also shows us that such things are against God's will. If God gives people diseases then why would Jesus bother to heal them? his creation of a God who tortures God's children is not only incorrect it is very dangerous. Because you never have to be nicer than your God. If we understand God as abusive to humans then it makes it so much easier for us to be abusive to, say, for example, contemplate nuking an entire continent in the name of peace or to allow a whole continent to suffer starvation due to harsh economic policies. God does not inflict people with diseases or poverty or car crashes or whatever else hurts human beings who are after all, God's children. The cost, however, of believing that God, as shown to us by the person of Jesus Christ, is loving, caring and good is that we then have to believe there are some things that God does not have control over. This can be very challenging for some.

Closely connected to this substitution theory is the image of God as Father losing his very own son Jesus. There are two trains of thought with regards to this. The first says that the insistence of the Good Friday death of Jesus on a cross as mandated by God was okay because it was God who suffered the worst sadness to lose God's own Son. This is often offered as comfort to those who have lost their own children – it is cold comfort I might add. This idea has never made any sense to me. After all, following this line of thought which one of us wouldn't do that? People who have this as the cornerstone of their faith almost always also believe in a totally omnipotent, omniscient God; a God who knows all things and makes all things happen. Well, how can God suffer then? If any of you knew that you had to kill a child today in order to spend eternity in everlasting light, intimacy and close comfort with that child would you not do it in an instant? The only way that God could suffer is if God did not know that Jesus would be resurrected. Perhaps this is a possibility not many have considered. Perhaps the creative possibilities and powers inherent in the Source of all love and new life is a surprise even to God's self. However, again we are presented with limits on God's omnipotent power.

The second train of reasoning around the allowing of the killing of Jesus on the cross is that it is such an affront and insult to God's greatness. In essence, the allowing of this insult indicates how great God really is. Again this paints God as a narcissist. If we are a Christ centred people understanding that Jesus best represents who God is, then we have to reject that understanding of God, because Jesus was not a narcissist. In fact, he was the complete opposite.

In terms of the sacrifice of Christ understood as once and for all, we need to remember how the early church, in particular understood the radical change Jesus had ushered in. How Jesus' life and teaching showed the way to connect with God was direct and immediate. When Carl and I were in England we went to the city of Bath which has amazing archeological artifacts. They have unearthed some astonishing altars for animal sacrifice. All of the ancient cultures did this. If you wanted something from God or you wanted to be forgiven by God you offered an animal sacrifice. The Romans did it. The Celts did it. The Jews did it within the temple that Jesus worshipped at. Remember the turning of the tables at the temple? Jesus was outraged that the religious authorities would prevent people from approaching God within the temple by charging outrageous prices for doves etc...which were to be offered for sin sacrifice. The great temple, the centre of all worship for Jews for centuries was destroyed by the Romans in 66 AD. It was absolutely leveled by the army after a Jewish revolt. What did this mean now for communing with God? Well, the Christian church looked back and saw in Jesus the once and for all paschal lamb of the Passover offering. The temple was not necessary after all. Animal sacrifice was not necessary after all.

Atonement, the idea that someone, specifically Christ, has to be sacrificed to atone for our sins is a late idea. It is an idea put forward by Anselm in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, an idea that grew sequentially on the foundation of original sin, laid out by Augustine of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. It doesn't come from the time of Christ. It does not even arise in

any kind of firm way within the first century. I would like to quote heavily from Marcus Borg's Book The Heart of Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

*In the judgment of the majority of mainline scholars, atonement theology does not go back to Jesus himself. We do not think that Jesus thought that the purpose of his life, his vocation, was his death. His purpose was what he was doing as a healer, wisdom teacher, social prophet, and movement initiator. His death was the consequence of what he was doing, but not his purpose. To use recent analogies, the deaths of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. were the consequence of what they were doing, but not their purpose. And like them, Jesus courageously kept doing what he was doing even though he knew it could have fatal consequence.*

*So we do not think Jesus saw his purpose as dying for the sins of the world. Rather, this interpretation, like the others in the New Testament is post-Easter and thus retrospective. Looking back on the execution of Jesus, the early movement sought to see a providential purpose in this horrendous event...*

*But in the first-century setting, the statement "Jesus is the sacrifice for sin" had a quite different meaning. The 'home' of this language, the framework within which it makes sense, is the sacrificial system centered in the temple in Jerusalem. According to temple theology, certain kinds of sins and impurities could be dealt with only through sacrifice in the temple. Temple theology thus claimed an institutional monopoly on the forgiveness of sins; and because the forgiveness of sins was a prerequisite for entry in the presence of God, temple theology also claimed an institutional monopoly on access to God.*

*In this setting to affirm "Jesus is the sacrifice for sin" was to deny the temple's claim to have a monopoly on forgiveness and access to God. It was an anti-temple statement. Using the metaphor of sacrifice, it subverted the sacrificial system. It meant: God in Jesus has already provided the sacrifice and has thus taken care of whatever you think separates you from God; you have access to God apart from the temple and its system of sacrifice. It is a metaphor of radical grace, of amazing grace.*

*Thus "Jesus died for our sins" was originally a subversive metaphor, not a literal description of either God's purpose or Jesus' vocation. It was a metaphorical proclamation of radical grace; and properly understood, it still is. It is therefore ironic to realize that the religion that formed around Jesus would within four hundred years begin to claim for itself an institutional monopoly on grace and access to God.*

**Nothing separates us from God except each other. Jesus taught us that what separates us from God is the harm that we do to one another, God's children.**

**The fourth Century was an important time in the church. It was the time of Augustine, the doctrine of original sin and the substitution of Christ. It was also the time of the selection of which books would be included in the Bible. The selection of these books is referred to as the canon. There were tons of gospels, letters and stories of the life of Christ floating about. The church fathers, (and I use that term deliberately because women had by then been removed from almost all positions of authority in the church), decided that the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were the keepers.**

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus J. Borg, The Heart of Christianity, HarperSanFrancisco, 2003.

This week a fragment of the “secret” Gospel of Judas was revealed. This gospel has been the world’s worst kept theological secret having been speculated about for years. I felt kind of proud that a Nova Scotian scholar, Dr. Craig Evans, was involved. The big question is, does it matter to our story today if Jesus asked Judas to betray him or not? I have often thought that Jesus, who was surely extremely empathic and intuitive and who understood humans and human nature better than anyone must have surely known what Judas was capable of, indeed what he would do. So, in a sense, he accepted Judas into his inner circle, knowing that betrayal was a possibility or even a certainty. I am not sure there is a huge distinction between allowing, even loving a potential betrayer in your innermost circle and asking a trusted disciple to get on with the whole inevitable thing. To me, the end result is one and the same. It needs to be remembered that the Gospel of Judas dates from the fourth century. The fourth century was a tumultuous time in the early Christian institutional church, a church which is becoming institutionalized within the Roman state. A church which in many ways was taking on Roman values that we have been trying to come out from under ever since.

We are running a bible study of Mark at St. John’s called Experiment in Practical Christianity, authored by John and Adrienne Carr. One of the sessions in this bible study involves participating in a trial in which the Supreme Judge of the Universe holds court and we have to present a legal case as defendants in Jesus’ crucifixion. For example, we have to write and present a defense in the first person for Judas, for Peter, for the Pharisees, for Pilate, for the crowd, for those helped and healed by Jesus and other characters in the story who initiated or at least allowed the crucifixion to take place. Because one of our co-leaders is a lawyer we did it in a real court room. It was powerful, even life changing for some participants. I will finish today by reading you part of the final judgment given by the Judge of the Supreme Court of the Universe.... She said,

*“I am ready now to give my final verdict on all of you. Before I do. I want to make one thing very plain. My judgment has nothing to do with any special relationship that Jesus may have had with me, any idea that he was my Chosen One or Messiah. My verdict is based solely on the fact that Jesus was a human being, one of my children whom I love.*

*Some of you have said that you did not have a choice. That is not true. Every one of you had a choice between serving the need of a human being for justice and love and serving something else. It was a tough choice, a risky choice, but a choice nonetheless. And in every case you decided that something else was more important than caring about human beings the way I do. That hurts.*

*I suppose I might be able to take that hurt better if you had only made that choice once. What makes it especially hard to take is that I see you making such choices over and over again. For the sake of your little gods, you commit, or more often allow, countless crucifixions.*

*I must find you guilty as charge. You must face that agony of knowing both what you’ve done and what you’ve let happen. But I simply cannot let you suffer alone. It goes against my very nature to reject you. I cannot let you go.*

*Therefore, this is my sentence: I condemn you to be loved by me forever.*"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John and Adrienne Carr, Experiment in Practical Christianity, Discipleship Resources, Nashville, 1985.