



Sermon

Unitarian Universalists don't generally focus very much on the Crucifixion. I did a search on Google and found that many more UU congregations have special worship services on Maundy Thursday than on Good Friday. Actually that's true for many Christian churches as well. Maundy Thursday is the night of the Last Supper, the night that Jesus met with his disciples and broke bread and wine with them. It was Passover, one of the highest Jewish holy days of the year, the celebration of liberation from slavery in Egypt. On this Passover he wished to spend this most special time with those that he loved. After the supper, Judas left to betray Jesus and Jesus took the remaining disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane. Then the soldiers came and arrested him.

To many it makes more sense to meet on Maundy Thursday, to celebrate communion on the symbolic night that Jesus first instituted the communion for his disciples. But is there something else, another reason why so many prefer to meet on Maundy Thursday than on Good Friday? Maundy Thursday is shadowed by the knowledge of what is going to happen on Good Friday. Good Friday is when it actually happens. All the brutality and violence, the humiliation, the crucifixion and death, that happens on Good Friday.

We are a society that is both fascinated with violence and afraid of violence. Our movies and TV shows become more violent all the time. Gun violence in this country is the highest of any rich nation in the world. Our weak social safety net leaves millions vulnerable at the most desperate times of their lives. This is a violence saturated country. At the same time, we try to separate and protect ourselves from violence of all kinds, real and imagined. There is so much fear about violence. We sanitize our children's books, make our children play indoors and in enclosed backyards, and create volumes of safety measures to protect them from anything that might happen. Anyone who can, retreats to the suburbs so that we can live in safe sanitized communities. We are fascinated with violence, we are frightened of violence, and want to escape the violence, and we absolutely want it to be the case that we have no responsibility for the violence in our world. We want to be pure.

Our preference for Maundy Thursday over Good Friday reflects our ambiguity about violence. Even though sad things happen on Maundy Thursday, Maundy Thursday can be pretty. A room filled with friends, bread and wine, a garden, the night sky.

Nothing about Good Friday is pretty. Good Friday is dark, it is bloody, it is brutal.

So is the traditional theology about Good Friday. One of the reasons that progressive Christians and Unitarian Universalists struggle with Good Friday is because the theology most of us are most familiar with



that explains Good Friday is also dark, bloody, and brutal. This is the theology that says that Jesus' death was the will of God. That God needed a substitutionary sacrifice to pay the price for our sins. We humans were impure and depraved so our death would never be enough to pay for our sins. Only Jesus, God's only Son, was pure, and through the shedding of his innocent blood and through his cries of anguish, and through his death, he paid the ultimate price for our sins and gave us eternal life.

This is a theology of shame. I remember a Good Friday service at a Christian church I used to attend where everyone was given a nail and invited to a large cross at the front of the church and given a hammer to pound their nail into the cross. They were told that this was symbolic of the fact that every one of them had killed Christ with their sin. It is exactly this kind of theology that pushed many of us out of the Christian church.

So it makes sense that we would avoid Good Friday. If the only explanation we have for Good Friday is one that offends and shames, then what good is it?

There is and must be a different way to look at Good Friday. In fact, there is. There is a theology that looks with open eyes at the violence, seeing it for what it is, seeing that every one of us has a place in systems of violence, but this theology steps back from the shame. This theology that is in harmony with the Unitarian Universalist larger view of the universe, that sees the natural relationship between God and humanity as one of a partnership, that sees the possibilities within the human condition, that sees the radical interconnectedness of all that is.

The Crucifixion is important because it's not a unique event. Crucifixions happen every day. Every day innocent people are humiliated and shamed. Every day there is unnecessary suffering. Our society has its scapegoats. Just as the crowd outside Pontius Pilate's window needed someone upon whom they could heap their fear and anger, we have ours. On a more personal level, we have all experienced losses so deep that we felt cut off from the things we most loved and needed to feel whole and full. Each of us has in our own way, said at some point in time, "Why oh why have you forsaken me?"

And we felt there was no way out. All was finished. And we entered into an empty time of winter.

In the Good Friday story, the most important moment is not actually when Jesus dies. It's what happens afterwards. The temple curtain, which stands between the people and the most holy part of the temple, tears in two. The separation between the people and God is gone. The earthly and the heavenly are one. What has been separated comes back together. And then the stone is rolled away from the tomb and there is new life.



Jesus is not crucified because God needs someone to pay. The Crucifixion is what happens when we become separated or alienated from our radical interdependence with one another and when we see this world and our relationships as an act power over instead of an act of power with. Jesus and the Jews of this time lived under an oppressive empire and he stood against it, and the crucifixion was the attempt of that empire to silence him. That is what crucified Jesus. So the crucifixion didn't cleanse us of our sin, it wasn't what God needed to forgive us, it's what happens when humanity gets off track and we try to control each other. And what it really does it separate us from the all that is life giving.

The Crucifixion happens when we are lost in brokenness, alienation, lost from the truth that we are one. The Crucifixion is what happens when some people are given more worth than others, when we turn our backs on the inherent worth and dignity of all living things, when we bypass justice, equity, and compassion and live through the energies of fear and anger. When the ties that bind us to each other are cut and we are alone, that is the crucifixion.

And yet, and here is the contradictory part of Good Friday, sometimes it is in the brokenness and alienation and loss that we come closest to the sacred, when we see most clearly what it is that really matters and what our individual spirits and the spirit of humanity are yearning for. Sometimes in our suffering the curtain is torn and we see those larger truths that have eluded us and we know what we are called to do so that we can step back into the interdependent web of life and do our part for our beautiful and hurting world. This is when we see most clearly that we want to be part of power with rather than power over. The curtain between who we are and who we can be is ripped down.

So Good Friday is both a warning and a promise. It warns us that we become complicit with violence when we turn away from our radical interconnectedness. And it promises us that nothing can separate us from wholeness.

Blessed be.