

Good Friday 2017

John 19:16-37

“Why?”

I heard a story about an old man who lived alone in Simcoe. It was early spring time, and he wanted to spade or work up his potato garden, but it was very hard work and he just wasn't up to it physically. His only son, who would have helped him, was in prison on a serious charge and there was no way he was going to be able to help. The old man wrote a letter to his son and mentioned his situation:

Dear Son: I am feeling pretty bad because it looks like I won't be able to plant my potato garden this year. I hate to miss doing the garden because your mother always loved planting time. I'm just getting too old to be digging up a garden plot. If you were here, all my troubles would be over. I know you would dig the plot for me, if you weren't in prison. Love, Dad

Shortly after he had sent his letter to his son the old man received this telegram: "For Heaven's sake, Dad, don't dig up the garden!! That's where I buried the WEAPONS!!" At 4 a.m. the next morning, a dozen RCMP agents, and local police officers showed up at the old man's house, and dug up the entire garden without finding any WEAPONS. Confused, the old man wrote another note to his son telling him what happened, and asked him what to do next. His son's reply was: "Go ahead and plant your potatoes, Dad. It's the best I could do for you from here."

I have always admired people who can think outside the box and come up with ingenious solutions to difficult problems. As a philosophy student from my University of Guelph days, I was always intrigued with the whole subject of logic. And I know I am not alone in my interest in such matters of logic. Almost every day we are apt to ask a question in regards to some situation that has us puzzled. “Why?” Why did this happen? What is her motivation?

It may be a genetic thing, because who hasn't had a child hit about age four and begin to endure the almost endless repetition, “But why Mommy? Why Daddy?” We also understand how useless the answer “because” is; as it leaves the child unsatisfied in our answer. What we often do not tell the child is that we cannot answer them fully, because we ourselves often do not know why. As we grow older the questions about why something happened, become deeper, and more challenging to answer. And just as with our children, the answers we sometimes receive leaves us unsatisfied.

Good Friday is, among many things, a day when some of the biggest questions of life haunt us. This day can truly puzzle us, and maybe that is why sometimes people avoid Good Friday services, and keep to Easter celebrations. Today marks the day when many people who are skeptical of the Christian faith, like to throw their biggest objection to Christianity in our faces. Why? Why was it even necessary for Jesus to die on a cross?

Maybe you are not aware that Gandhi actually admired Jesus very much, but he wrote this about Jesus in his autobiography, “I could accept Jesus as a martyr, an embodiment of sacrifice, and a divine teacher. His death on a cross was a great

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example to the world, but that there was anything like a mysterious or miraculous virtue in it, my heart could not accept.” The reality is that since the cross is the central symbol of our faith, and the crucifixion is at the heart of the gospel, we cannot dismiss it easily.

Nor can we avoid the hard question of why. At the heart of the criticism of the crucifixion, is the idea that if God is so loving, and forgiving, why demand the sacrifice at all? The sacrifice of his Son.

There are even liberal protestant theologians who have referred to the crucifixion as a kind of divine child abuse. So, is there an adequate answer to the question of why? Why did Jesus have to die in such a terrible way? It is difficult in the time we have today to give a fully accounting of all the arguments many fine scholars have put forth. However, I am indebted to Timothy Keller and his book “The Reason for God” for helping me get a stronger grip on the subject.

Keller’s first idea is to think of the question of “why the cross”, in an economic way. Imagine, if you will, a neighbour of yours backing out of his driveway and hitting the fence between your yards, wrecking the gate. You find out your house insurance does not cover such damage. Therefore, you have two options. The first is to demand that your neighbour pay for the damage. The second is that you refuse to let him pay anything and you absorb the cost. There is also a middle ground where you share the cost.

Notice, Keller points out, that in each case, the cost of the damage has to be borne by someone. Either you, or your neighbour, must bear the cost. Even if you forgive him, the debt doesn’t just vanish into thin air. Forgiveness in this illustration means bearing the cost of your neighbour’s misdeed yourself. Now we all understand that not all wrongs we experience can be assessed in purely economic terms. Sometimes someone has damaged our reputation, an opportunity, or taken away aspects of our freedom. It is difficult to put a price on such things, although courts sometimes try.

Yet, even if we cannot put a dollar amount on our injury, we still carry in us a sense that the perpetrator has incurred a debt that must be dealt with. I think it is very possible that the greater the hurt, the greater our sense that we need the debt redressed somehow. In this situation, we can seek to make the perpetrator suffer for what they have done. We can withhold relationship, or actively or even passively, look for ways to punish them.

In our efforts to pay them back, we think we are gaining a rebalancing of the scales. However, this approach causes serious side effects. You can, over time, in seeking recompense, become: harder, colder, and therefore more self-centered. You can also transfer some of your hurt feelings over to entire groups that the one who hurt you represents. This is how some prejudice is born. There is also the real possibility of an escalation, as the perpetrator hurts you again, to seek their own redress.

Blood feuds are born this way. Just ask the Hatfield’s and McCoy’s. There is another option however. You can forgive. Forgiveness means refusing to let them pay you for what they did. However, to forgive by refusing to lash out or retaliate is agony;

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it is suffering. Not only do you suffer from the original harm, but you forgo the consolation of inflicting the same on them. You are absorbing the debt, and it hurts terribly. Some may even say it feels like a death.

One person, who understood the suffering involved in forgiveness perhaps as much as anyone, was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer returned to Germany to resist Hitler and it cost him his life. In his famous book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer reported that forgiveness always involves suffering. He wrote in part:

My brother's burden which I must bear is not only his outward lot, his natural characteristics and gifts, but quite literally his sin. And the only way to bear that sin is by forgiving it in the power of the cross of Christ in which I now share... Forgiveness is the Christ like suffering which it is the Christian's duty to bear.

Bonhoeffer lived out his words by confronting evil. It was not "cheap grace" as he calls it.

It was also costly because he refused to hate. He passed through the agonizing process required to truly love your enemies. Bonhoeffer simply lived out what Jesus did for him. Jesus bore his sins, bearing the cost of them. So, why didn't God just forgive. Well we see now that no one just forgives. Forgiveness involves bearing a cost, absorbing the penalty for the one who harmed you. On the cross, we see Jesus doing visibly and cosmically, what every human being must ultimately do to truly forgive someone.

The only way to truly triumph over evil is through suffering, suffering through forgiveness. Let me remind you that Jesus and God are one, therefore God did not dump the suffering on someone else, but bore it himself. The God we worship is fundamentally different than the primitive gods of other cultures, who demanded blood to have their wrath appeased. Rather this is the God who becomes human, and offers his own lifeblood; in order to honour moral justice and merciful love, so that someday all evil can be destroyed.

The cross is not just a lovely little example of sacrificial love. Throwing your life away needlessly is not admirable-it is wrong. Jesus' death only has meaning if it is necessary to rescue us. There was a debt to be paid, a cost to our sin and God paid it for everyone.

The cross of Christ is also an exchange of love. Keller explains it this way. Imagine, if you will, that you meet someone who is innocent, but who is being hunted down by secret agents or the government. He or she reaches out to you for help. If you don't help them, they will probably die, but if you help them, you- who is perfectly safe and secure-will be in mortal danger. This is the plot behind many an action movie.

Again, it's the other person or me. They will experience increased security and safety through your investment, but only because you assume to enter into their insecurity and vulnerability. True love works like this. Ask any therapist or counsellor who works with emotionally vulnerable people and they will tell you that

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you never exit such a relationship without being emotionally drained yourself. You give, of yourself to help the other person.

Parents do this all the time. Children come into this world completely dependant on others. Parents must give up much of their: energy, resources, time, and emotional strength, to care for and nurture their children. Not to mention their freedom, unless you have a good nanny or grandparents nearby. If you only care for your children when it is convenient for you, they will grow up as emotionally needy and very troubled. In parenting, it is either you or your children.

The cross demonstrates this truth in that God gives of his strength to meet our weakness. John Stott in his book *The Cross of Christ*, writes that this substitution is at the very heart of the Christian message. He writes: *The essence of sin is we human beings substituting ourselves for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for us. We...put ourselves where only God deserves to be; God...puts himself where we deserve to be.*

If God is truly a God of love, then how can he not become personally involved in suffering the violence, oppression, grief, weakness, and pain that we experience? The answer is He can't. And Christianity is the only world religion that claims God does.

Jesus in the cross suffers for us and with us. Jesus voluntarily took a place beside those who felt powerless before those who sought to oppress and harm.

On the cross Jesus wins through losing, triumphs through defeat, achieves power through weakness, and service, comes to wealth by becoming poor (In other words giving it all away).

So why did Jesus have to die? Even Jesus asked that question in the garden of Gethsemane when he asked if there was another way. But there wasn't, and Jesus ultimately accepted that fact. On the cross, he cried out in agony, "Why? Why am I being forsaken?" Why was it necessary? The answer we discover from the bible is that Jesus died on the cross FOR US!

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PRAYER: O Christ, help us relive this day in your life that we may relive your life in our day. You went to your death-the innocent for the guilty, the gentle for the violent, and the obedient for the rebellious-opening not your mouth. Now we have learned that, before our world can experience a resurrection like yours, we must experience a death like yours. Teach us how to die as you died, O Christ, that we might live as you lived-for God, enduring the cross and despising the shame. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: O gentle Savior, you declared God to be present to us in a gracious and festive way. If we find it nearly impossible to stand by the cross in your hour of anguish, it is because we, like you, cannot comprehend that such a gracious God would abandon you, offering no comfort in your affliction, speaking no words in the deadening silence, refusing to intervene in your suffering and torment. This is the cup of suffering that you long dreaded. Yet you did not seek to ease the pain-refusing the wine mixed with myrrh. You did not curse your executioners. You bore the derision, the scourging, and the crucifixion, calling from the depths of your horror, calling to the last upon your God.

Christ, you have been delivered up to the cross and nail, delivered up to death and sealed behind the final stone. All this you bore for us, suffering and dying that we might be born to eternal life. O Lord, be with us in every hour of darkness and torment. Help us to endure any hours of tortured questioning of God. Teach us what it means to die to self that the unfathomable purposes of God may break through in some unforeseeable dawn. Remembering your suffering and with quiet trust that God raised you from death, we gather as your people to thank you and wait upon you for your word to us today. In your name, we pray. Amen.

BENEDICTION: O God, you call us, as you called Jesus, to a life of self-denial in service to others. Here, in this celebration of Christ's passion, we have renewed our commitment to our calling. We shall ever pray, as Christ did, that the cup of wrath might pass away, but if it cannot, grant us always the courage to drink of it. Assure us that the cross will ever be for us, as it was for Christ, not a tree of death but a tree of life, joining us to you, joining us one to another. Amen.