

## PAIN

### *Sermon for Good Friday B—Jn 18:1-19:42*

LPC, 4/3/15

Good Friday is not for sissies. This is one reason why Good Friday services are generally not our most popular. Good Friday is a painful occasion. By your voluntary presence here today you indicate, whether you realize it or not, that you have decided not to accept an axiom of our general culture, which is that pain can and should be avoided. By being here you are voluntarily entering a place of pain.

This is not something people generally do in our culture. We tend to regard painlessness as normative. Pain, we suppose, is an interruption to normal life, an aberration. Pain is bad. When, against our best efforts, pain occurs, it is to be gotten out of as quickly as possible. To enter into pain voluntarily is sick. We call it masochism.

I have been reading a fascinating book by Richard Rohr, a Franciscan friar, called *Falling Upward: Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. Father Rohr says that during the first half of life people are establishing themselves. In order to do this we have to draw distinctions between what we are and what we are not. This leads to a necessary dualism in our thinking. Our culture is very much geared to first-half-of-life thinking.

There is nothing at all wrong with first-half-of-life thinking. It is necessary for healthy human development. But it is inadequate, Father Rohr says, for the second half of life. Never to progress beyond the first half of life contributes to growing frustration, bitterness or anger in the second half of life.

The first half of life emphasizes doing. The second half of life emphasizes being. Whereas the first half of life requires discrimination between things, the second half of life discovers harmonization between things.

The dualism which characterized our earlier development gives way, if we are to be happy and fulfilled in the second half of life, to unitive and inclusive thinking. To relate Rohr's theory to the well-known serenity prayer, in the first half of life one changes the things one can, in the second half of life one accepts the things that cannot be changed, which requires wisdom, which is recognizing the common ground behind all things.

Let me relate Rohr's Two-Halves of Life theory to the problem of pain. During the first half of life it may be good to avoid pain. Pain tells us when we are doing something that is bad for us – whether it is sticking our finger in boiling water, languishing in a bad relationship, throwing up after drinking too much, or dragging ourselves to a job for which we are fundamentally unsuited. If we learn to avoid these things, we stand a better chance of surviving.

Sooner or later, however, as we enter the second half of life, we begin to realize that all pain cannot be avoided completely. Pain is not an interruption, or an aberration in life. Pain *is* life. As such pain may not even be all bad. That is because loving, which even our culture admits is good, inevitably opens us to pain.

If you love, you know this. Our love of friends, spouses, children, causes us to bleed when they bleed. Our love of common humanity pulls us into grief even when we hear of something remote, like the Germanwings airbus crash.

As long as we love there will be pain. The cultural assumption that pain can and should be avoided is false. The pain that comes of loving not only cannot but *must not* be avoided, because, according to Jesus, love is an absolute imperative.

Now, God willing, none of us is likely to be crucified for love as Christ was. But Christ's crucifixion, which we commemorate today, shows us some things we must learn if we are to be wise:

1. Pain is part of what it is to love.
2. Pain cannot be avoided if one loves.
3. Pain *must not* be avoided because we *must* love if we are to follow Jesus. We know this because of Jesus' words at the Last Supper, which we heard last night at the Maundy Thursday service: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

With this in mind, I will touch again on a point I raised in Palm Sunday's meditation. If we can't enter into Christ's pain, we will not be able to enter into the pain of our fellow human beings. Christ *wants* us to be able to enter the pain of our fellow human beings because Christ wants us to love one another.

Therefore, if Christ's suffering on Good Friday moves us to pity, for God's sake (literally, *for God's sake*,) we must not stop there. We must allow ourselves to be moved to pity by the suffering of our fellow human beings. We must allow ourselves to bear witness to their pain, as today we bear witness to Christ's. We must allow ourselves to feel our own pain and the pain of others. We must allow ourselves to love.