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AMDG

Good Friday, April 14, 2017

What wondrous love is this, O my soul?

What wondrous love is this? It's difficult enough for us to get our heads around this wondrous love on Maundy Thursday when we're commemorating Jesus' Last Supper and washing the feet of the disciples. But, it's even more difficult tonight, as our focus shifts to the cross - the cross we sing about, the cross we sign ourselves with, the cross we wear around our necks, the cross we lifted high on the steeple of our church just a few short months ago.

And, tonight our attention is focused on this cross and the wondrous love it represents for us. For many this wondrous love is about an angry God demanding an epic, divine-sized atonement for the evils of humanity. And, Jesus offering himself as the atoning sacrifice for our inherent sinfulness.

But my friends this cannot be the point. Because Jesus' life showed us that God is first, last and always - love. And love is not sadistic; it does not demand retribution, it is not vengeful. Jesus taught us that through love we are one with Christ and through Christ are beloved of God. Jesus taught us that the way of this love is not violence, but peace.

So, what then is this wondrous love that we celebrate in this cross here before us? It has been, and will probably always be a great mystery to me, but a mystery that I cannot put down. Why?

As I am coming to understand, at this point in my journey, the way of the cross is about Jesus' walk into the darkness and his walk with us into our own darkness. Jesus in the fullness of his humanity and the fullness of his divinity, at one with us and at one with God - absorbing all the rejection, resistance, hatred and violence that humanity can throw at him. On the cross, Jesus embraces these shameful creations of our false selves and refuses to respond in kind. Instead, he responds with deep sorrow and

sadness – but also with acceptance, understanding, forgiveness, and love. When I go to the foot of the cross I hear Jesus saying, “Go ahead. Bring it on. Show me the worst that you’ve got. Because, the fear, the hate, and the violence stop here. The ‘winning and losing’ stop here. The “accepted and the rejected” all stop here. The self-loathing and self-doubt stop here. Even if you need to kill me and all that I stand for, I will not respond with vengeance or power or control. Instead I will show you confidence in the face of persecution; acceptance in the face of rejection; hope in the face of despair; faith in the midst of doubt; I will model trust in my Father’s love even when all seems lost. And my Father will vindicate me, and with me, all of you.”

It is at the cross where we experience God’s extravagant love and our own selfish response clearer than anywhere else. The cross shows us in the most graphic possible way the ugly cost of our fear, paranoia, self-preoccupation, and need for control. But in embracing the cross, Jesus also shows us another way. He reveals the full potential of our humanity – our intended divine destiny - which is to choose love and trust in God above all else, perhaps most especially when it seems to make no sense. As God’s beloved, God’s intent is for us is to love God and to love each other as God has loved us – without condition or limit – even in the face of evil, pain, failure, and the fear of apparent death.

On the cross and three days later in the resurrection, Jesus showed us that darkness never prevails. He shows us that within ourselves we have the one true thing that can overcome all evil - not a religion, not a political system, or philosophy, not something from “out there” somewhere - Jesus shows us that the key to the redemption of all the world is in here, in ourselves.

Jesus showed us with his passion that it is love, and only love, that can absorb evil and death and transform it into life everlasting...and that powerful love my dear brothers and sisters is in all of us. It is our calling. It is our true self.

At the same time we all have within us, in our confused and false selves, the means to destroy and pervert God’s creation. But, that

false power can never prevail. Because within us we have the transformative love of God - our true selves, our victorious selves. The love that can take all our fears, all our sorrows, all our self-doubt and transform it into a shining gift for the world.

So, rather than approaching the cross with pity - which Jesus and God do not need; or with shame - which is a useless dead end emotion; let us go to the cross with a willingness to search deep within ourselves for our own cross. We all carry one, sometimes multiple crosses. These crosses are our hidden and secret hurts and anxieties. Some of us have carried these crosses for a long time. You'll know what your cross is, because it's a truth you cannot tell, a fear you refuse to bring out in the open. Maybe it's a problem you can't seem to solve, where you've been wanting to control an outcome, or manipulate others into doing your will. Perhaps it's a person you do not want to confront, or a condition you do not want to accept. Perhaps your cross is still nebulous and only presents itself to you as a vague dissatisfaction or resentment. Others may be surprised you carry this cross, because you've been so good at concealing it. But, Jesus knows. And Jesus understands, as no one else can. Come to the foot of the cross today, with your own cross in mind. And, as you approach the "sweet wood" of the cross today, with a kiss or a touch of the hand, try and see it with new eyes. Look beyond the evil represented on the surface, deep into the darkness of that wood where God beckons you, and where he goes before you, through the cross into the love that redeems all fear, all suffering, all evil. Pray for the willingness to take up your own cross, without hesitation, without condition, and let God guide you through the pain into the mystery of God's transformative love.