

A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts
Preached by the Rev. Jacqueline Clark on April 10, 2020 (Good Friday)

When we were last together here in person, what feels like a lifetime ago, Father Tim proclaimed these words from very early in John's Gospel—"for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." That, for me, is where Good Friday begins. It begins with a God whose love for creation is so deep that the sin which divides God from creation breaks God's heart. Whose heart is so tender that it aches with all the suffering, all the pain, all the sorrow it beholds as God looks on the world. It begins with a God who is pure compassion. That word compassion literally means "to suffer with." And that is quite literally what God does. Even before God becomes human, God's compassion is so profound that it's as if God feels our suffering with our every one of our hearts and every one of our bodies.

God's response to that suffering is to draw close to it, as close as God possibly can. It is to become human, so that God can listen to us with God's own ears, and speak to us with God's own mouth, hold us with God's own arms. God comes alongside us to be right there, present to us in our anxiety, our pain, our fear and our suffering.

Today, we hear the story of Jesus' passion, of *Jesus'* suffering. We hear about how God experiences what it is like to be a human person, a body and a heart, living through the very worst of the human experience. Betrayal. Abandonment. Loneliness. Humiliation. Torture. Despair. Death. In one sense, it is something new. But in another sense, it simply reveals to us what has always been true. God is showing us that God's compassion is so profound that God has been to all of those places with us. God is showing us, through Jesus' suffering, that God is and always has suffered with us.

Compassion is what we see happening on the cross today, and compassion is what Good Friday calls us to. When we see God come close to the suffering of creation in Jesus, it teaches us, as my friend Emily so beautifully puts it, that the Christian response to suffering is not to ignore it or dismiss it or to move away, but to move towards it. But it is so much easier said than done. I will never forget my first day as a part-time hospital chaplain during seminary. I was working at a very under-resourced hospital on the South Side of Chicago. After a few preliminaries, we were told to start knocking on doors. As I nervously made my way to my assigned floor, I heard the screams of one patient echoing through the hallways. The staff told me that she was in pain, but they were having trouble locating the doctor who could sign off on additional pain medication. I went in, and found a frail, elderly woman lying in the bed, in pain so intense that all she could do was cry out. There was nothing I could do but sit there with her, to be with her in her pain.

Compassion can be incredibly difficult. The philosopher, mystic, and activist Simone Weil wrote about how "in the first legend of the Holy Grail, the seeker who receives the Grail is the one who asks the vessel's guardian, a wounded king, the question 'What are you going through?'"¹ Weil goes on to say that, "The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it is a miracle."² It hurts us to see someone in pain. It gives us a glimpse into our own frailty and vulnerability. And too often,

¹ Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 166.

² *Ibid.*, 166.

there is nothing we can do to change it.³ When we sit with someone who is grieving, or talk with someone with anxiety or depression, there is nothing we can say that will make it better. When we visit someone in the hospital, we can't offer a cure. When we hear stories, as so many of us have through Sacred Ground, about the way racism has devastated lives, we cannot fix what has already happened. There is such discomfort and powerlessness in that. And so it is tempting to ignore it, to dismiss it, or to turn away. Which is why, by the time we arrive at the cross, of all Jesus' followers, only Mary, Mary, Mary Magdalene, and the beloved disciple are left.

Much of the time, when we witness suffering, all we can offer is to be present. To come close. To offer compassion. It often feels so meager, so inadequate. But it is what we are called to do. In the first legend of Holy Grail, that question, what are you going through, the seeker's willingness to witness the king's pain heals the king's wound. There is something healing about being seen, being heard, being accompanied, even when we are powerless to stop the pain. And it is exactly God's compassion, Jesus' passion, that brings salvation, healing, redemption, to creation.

That is what we do today. We witness the depth of divine compassion. We witness the unspeakable physical and emotional pain God willingly suffers as the cost of loving us, and the cost of coming close to us. Jesus schools us in what compassion is all about. And we practice that compassion by staying at the foot of the cross. Not dismissing it. Not running. Not turning away. But coming close, staying here, suffering with. And in doing so, we share in God's own heart.

³ Ibid, 166.