

“Love on the Cross.”

Almost from the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus was in trouble with the leaders of his day — religious *and* civil. And in retrospect, it not hard to see why.

The Jewish religious leaders objected to Jesus because they thought his teachings were too radical. For example:

When Jesus healed a paralytic, he declared that he had the authority to forgive sins; a privilege reserved for God alone.

When Jesus healed a man with a withered hand, in a synagogue on the Sabbath — something that could *easily* have been done on another day — Jesus declared that his work — his ministry — was more important than observing all of the laws about keeping the Sabbath holy.

When Jesus declared that it was not what went into a person that defiled them, but rather what came out of a person — from their heart — his words were seen as a threat to the entire Kosher system of dietary laws.

And when Jesus declared that the poor, and *not* the rich, were blessed in the eyes of God, he was overturning a longstanding bench-mark indicator of who was blessed and who wasn't.

Furthermore, in his teachings, Jesus implied:

that God preferred the prodigal son to the one who stayed at home,

that God preferred the tax collector to the Pharisee,

that God preferred the adulterers to their judges, *and*

that God preferred the law-breakers to the guardians of the law.

To drive home this last point even further, Jesus was in the habit of associating with the most flagrant of moral failures, and in the most intimate of social settings.

As if all this was not enough, Jesus addressed the God of Israel with what many considered a sacrilegious familiarity — he referred to God as “Abba,” a child’s name of his or her “Daddy.”

And what’s more, at every turn, Jesus emphasized that the character of God was one of immeasurable tenderness, and that God *particularly* cared for the abandoned and the oppressed.

And Jesus taught about a God in whose Kingdom the value system of the prevailing culture was wholly reversed — in which the last would be first, and the first last.

The last straw for the Jewish authorities was when Jesus proclaimed himself “the resurrection and the life,” and then backed up that claim by restoring to life a man who had been dead for four days.

And so, because of all this, it was the opinion of the Jewish religious leaders that Jesus *had* to die.

And as it worked out, the Roman government also thought that Jesus needed to die, but for entirely different reasons.

You see, even though Jesus may never have openly claimed to be the Messiah, a lot of people thought he was, and were ready to rally around him. But the Romans had a long history of dealing with so-called messiahs; they were seen as a threat to their power and authority. And so, and under the pragmatic rubric of “better safe than sorry,” the Romans typically dispatched any wannabe messiahs by nailing them to a cross.

So, yes, Jesus had to die.

But in reality, it was not the *false* claims of the Jewish religious leaders that *sent* Jesus to the cross. Nor was it the iron nails of Rome that *kept* Jesus on the cross. Rather, it was love:

It was a love so *great* that it was willing to endure false accusations.

It was a love so *deep* that it was willing to face rejection and abandonment.

It was a love so *broad* that it was willing to face torture and slow execution.

It’s the love of a parent for his or her child. And it’s is a love that says, “I will do this for you.”

However, one of the traps that we all too easily fall into on days like this, is that we get caught up in thinking about what Good Friday is supposed to *mean* for us, that

we never get around to what's really important — we forget to try to *feel* what Good Friday must have been like for those who experienced it.

To feel the betrayal.

To feel the fear and uncertainty.

And to feel *outrage* at the fact that the whole thing was sanctioned by the two noblest pillars-of-culture in the ancient world: Roman law, and Jewish piety.

To feel the bewilderment that the death of Jesus was sanctioned, not by humanity at its worst, but by humanity at its *best*.

I think one of the easiest ways for us to get in touch with the emotional content of Good Friday, is to remember the words of that African-American spiritual:

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” *Hear* it.

Were you there when they nailed him to the tree? *Feel* it.

Were you there when they pierced him in his side?
Experience it.

Were you there when they laid him in the tomb? *Witness* it.

Were you there to “tremble, tremble, tremble” at the whole event, because, if we don't tremble, then chances are that we really haven't understood the fullness of the Gospel message.

And that is a shame, because it means that the phrase “God so loved the world” will remain merely a concept, an idea, and be stripped of it's power to convict us in love, and to renew us by grace.

Finally, the Danish theologian, Søren Kierkegaard, once said that if there is one thing that unites us as Christians, it is our forgetting — our *overlooking* — how much we have been loved by God.

We are not united by what we have done, or left undone; or even by what we have believed or not believed. We are united in *not remembering* with what great love we have been loved in Christ. We have not felt, nor remembered in our hearts, that it wasn't the nails that kept Jesus on the cross. It was God's love.

It was the love of our “Abba,” our “Daddy.” And this, trembling, we should never forget.

Amen.