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National Presbyterian Church

## **Both Sides of The Nails**

Matthew 26:36-27:31

Dr. Quinn Fox

*Good Friday. There is no other day like today. In all of history there has been no other day like it; there never will be again. We live in a world that has seen millions of people prematurely put to death; but this death alone concerns the salvation of the whole world. **Let us pray.***

We would really rather not deal with the crucifixion; increasingly churches are paying scant attention or overlooking this day entirely. This avoidance of the death of the Son of God has been going on from the earliest days of the church. One of the first heresies originated from people who couldn't reconcile the fact that the Son of God suffered the pain of the cross. God wasn't supposed to suffer. So they came up with the idea that it wasn't really Jesus on the cross, but a supernaturally exchanged "stand-in." By the Second Century opponents of Christianity were pointing out the incongruity of a God who suffers. There was then and always is a temptation of moving from the Palm Sunday triumphal entry to the triumphant resurrection at Easter, bypassing the Passion of our Lord on the Cross. Except for the few who were there. And so we gather to consider the meaning of the cross. For Christian Faith the cross makes all the difference.

### I

Our society strives to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative, to think in terms of possibilities. Some people are endlessly pessimistic; others seek to find the silver lining in every cloud. I am not *endlessly* pessimistic. To be so would mean adopting the world view of the Buddhist, who sees life as something painful, to be endured just long enough to escape. And I do find an occasional silver lining. But I find it unrealistic and hollow to deny the existence of pain in our lives. Bad things happen. And many times, there simply is nothing good in them. There is no silver lining to the death of 6 million Jews, the destruction of an ecosystem or the slow painful death from cancer. There is nothing good about the premature death of a loved one, a school shooting or an airline disaster. And there is no silver lining in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

It is important to understand what crucifixion was. This is not a pleasant subject, but today is the occasion to think about it. Among the various means of putting people to death we might list the electric chair, or firing squad; the hangman's noose, guillotine or lethal injection could be named. These have in common efficiency. In late Medieval and Reformation England the treasonous were hanged, drawn and quartered. The purpose was not only to inflict suffering; it also served as a warning to the population. Over the centuries other means of execution have been devised to cause pain, and to prolong agony. But crucifixion was unique in that it was used not only to deter, and to inflict pain, but specifically to degrade. Crucifixion was barbarous; it was considered utterly offensive and obscene in the ancient world. No other method has ever matched it in terms of public disgust; that was its express

purpose. Even in the crude context of antiquity, it was only practiced on slaves and the very worst kinds of criminals. The Jewish historian Josephus suggests that crucifixion was an all-too frequent occurrence in the occupied Roman Province of Judea. On Good Friday Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was put to death on a cross between two criminals.

## II

How it must have hurt! At so many different levels it must have hurt. What does it mean that God's only son was abandoned? Abandoned by the world he came to save, abandoned by his disciples and closest friends; abandoned by the Father in heaven. The awful cry, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" And it pained God as well, sacrificing his only son. What it really means for the Father to have forsaken the son is ultimately beyond our comprehension. We cannot begin to imagine. It was the cost necessary for the sin of the whole world. That is love at a high price. That is sacrifice beyond our ability to grasp!

And then there's the physical pain. Nails through the hands and feet of the Son of God. These nails—they were actually spikes—were different than the kinds we normally find at the hardware store. They were not uniformly cylindrical. Rather, they were crudely tapered from a large head into a small, sharp point. The hammer is the oldest tool known to civilization. It is essentially a force amplifier. When a nail is hit with a hammer, a direct transfer takes place. The entire force received passes directly into the small, sharp point. Combine the sharpness of a pin-prick with the bludgeoning force of a sledgehammer--through hands and feet.

And the bigger the hammer, and the bigger the head of the nail, the more force applied to that one sharp point. Who is responsible for this? Who is behind those hammer blows, driving nails into the hands and feet of our Lord? Who caused it?

## III

Too much historical mischief has been made in assigning guilt for Jesus' death, so we must tread carefully when we pose the question of responsibility. Was it the Jews? The crowd who urged Pilate, yelling "Crucify him." But the crowds had been stirred up by the Jewish leaders. The Sanhedrin had plotted and schemed and instigated. But they believed they were doing the right thing. They wanted Jesus out of the way before a riot broke out that would provoke Rome's occupation troops to even greater brutality—perhaps again to mass crucifixions. Behind the Sanhedrin was Caiaphas. His specialty was calculation. When the Jews started worrying that they might all find trouble with the Romans because of Jesus, Caiaphas figured they should get rid of the Galilean. As much as we might like, the blame can't be placed on Caiaphas either. He was just being expedient. And, after all, the Jews didn't crucify people; crucifixion was a Roman form of death. The Roman Soldiers were the actual executioners. But they were only following orders. Wasn't it Pontius Pilate, their superior, who made the final decision? But personally, as we read, Pilate didn't want Jesus to die; he washed his hands of it all.

When it comes to the crucifixion there is no archaeology of guilt that can be uncovered, layer by layer. Holy Scripture and our theology guide us to our role and complicity in the Savior's death. It is summarized well in the words of a hymn we will sing later this evening. We will want to pay close attention to these words: "Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied You; I

crucified You.” “I crucified you.” This is the key insight. Not the Jews; not the Romans; Not Caiaphas; not Pilate. It is I. We are responsible for the nails. Each of us individually. All of humanity The bigger the hammer, and the bigger the head of the nail, the more force applied to that one sharp point. The nails are of cosmic proportion. The force is the sin of the entire world, piercing the hands and feet of the Son of God.

#### IV

But there's more to our participation in crucifixion than that. Part of the divine Gospel paradox tells us that we have a place on the other side of the nails. Paul writes to the Galatian Christians that he has been crucified with Christ. Jesus himself tells his disciples to take up our own cross to follow him. In the triumph of God's kingdom, it is not only Christ who dies; we must die with him so that we can be raised with him and live with him.

Christians are called to suffer pain and even death, like Jesus did. But we are never called to suffer separation from God. That is the one cross we will never have to bear. Jesus has done that for us. Much in the world will say “no” to us, but God never will. And when we experience our afflictions, and God knows we have and we will, we can depend on God to be with us in the midst of them. The outcome of our distress is not always good; there is not a silver lining in every cloud. But our affliction can always be a vehicle for God's grace. And that is significant. James tells us to count it all joy when we have these experiences, because they make our faith stronger.

We all know disappointment and suffer pain; somehow in the midst of our affliction, God is at work. Jesus said it's the one who loses life who saves it. How God transforms that which is awful into something beautiful is beyond comprehension. But God is continually doing that. How it is that a grain of wheat must first die in order for it to bring forth life again, I don't know, but that's what's good about Good Friday.

#### Conclusion

The gospel for us always seems to begin with bad news and end in good news. We are transgressors, and sin separates us from God—this is bad news. Yet it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us. God is about the business of transformation. He took the greatest injustice and cruelest act of all time and turned them into a beautiful love story. This is outrageously Good News.

As surely as God transforms the tragedy of the cross to a triumph of grace, he transforms the pain of our afflictions into sanctifying graces that draw us closer to Him and his people. He takes our meager attempts at obedience and turns them into acceptable sacrifices. That's why Friday is called good.

And so we find ourselves on both sides of the nails. One side we are on by virtue of our rejection of God. The other side we have chosen, by virtue of God's grace, as we identify with our Lord. As the nail of our personal affliction grows to unbearable proportion, the weight of the hammer comes crashing down. That nail will pierce us and drive us to whatever we embrace. As we embrace Christ and his cross, we are driven to him. . .crucified with him... so that we may be made complete and whole.