

If you were in church last weekend to celebrate Palm Sunday, then you heard Mark's version of the passion narrative just five days ago. Tonight we have heard the same story being told once again, but this time from John's perspective. Each of the four gospel writers tells the story of Jesus' crucifixion from their own angle. Clearly they all agree that Jesus died on that cross. But if we were to lay these narratives side by side in a Bible study, we would notice that there are some important differences.

That bothers some people, especially if they are prone to ask questions like, "well, what *really* happened?" But I liken it to what happens when I sit down with four adult children who have just lost a parent and they are now gathered together with me to plan for the funeral. They may now be spread out across the country with their own families, but death brings them all back together in the same room again and at some level takes them back in time as well. So they find themselves walking into the parish where they went to Sunday School or learned to acolyte and the memories come flooding back.

Do you know that show *Cold Case*? As the police try to solve a case from ten or twenty-five years ago, they'll show the person as they look today; but then all of a sudden you are seeing the person as they looked back when the crime was committed. I've sometimes had something like that experience as I listen to family members talking about their loss. Someone will remember how mom used to read to them every night when they were little and someone else will tell about the only time they ever saw mom get really angry with dad. And there is this forty-three year old man sitting across from you, but if you squint you can almost see the little boy at thirteen...

Part of what you learn over years of having conversations like those is that each of those adult children knew the parent differently. It is a beautiful and holy thing to be invited to share and I never feel the need to find out what "really" happened in that house. The point is that relationships are like that: we experience one another from different perspectives and angles—and even if four kids are at the bedside with their mom at her death, each one can only experience it from their unique perspective.

*We can only see the world through our own eyes.* But in listening closely to others we can, with God's help, also begin to see something of what they see. So I think it's helpful to bring something like that mindset to Good Friday as well. I am increasingly frustrated by Good Friday preaching that reduces Jesus' death on the cross to a dogmatic formulation of the atonement. What are we not hearing when we impose our presuppositions onto their testimony? Or as the late, great Lutheran bishop and

New Testament scholar, Krister Stendahl, used to put it: what is gained when you put four unique gospels into a blender and puree them?

As John tells this story, Jesus is in total control—even to the very end. He is not a victim; he is victor. Now to our normal way of looking at the world this dying doesn't look like a victory. But Jesus has been talking about his "hour" from the beginning of John's Gospel and about how it will be when he is "lifted up" that the world will see him for who he really is: the Incarnate Word of God and the Light shining in the darkness. It is through John's eyes especially that we most clearly behold Jesus stretching out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross, so that everyone might come within the reach of his saving embrace. *It is finished*, he says, at the end; almost defiantly and certainly with a sense of accomplishment.

Before his last breath, however, there is one more little detail that only John tells us about.

*Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.*

Even in death—and maybe most especially in his dying—Jesus creates ties that bind. He makes us family to each other. We are asked to take care of one another: to be mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers to one another. In fact, this one episode takes us to the very heart of John's Gospel.

It takes a certain kind of vision to see that and then a whole lot of courage to live it. There's just a meanness in this world that we'll never fully escape: shooters go on a rampage in places like Binghamton, NY, and messiahs are crucified on a place called The Skull. We hurt the ones we love because there is some part of us that prefers darkness over light, deception over truth, and revenge over forgiveness.

But it's not just that. We are talking about sin, because this day compels us to talk about sin. But sin isn't always obvious: far more often it is pernicious and subtle. How often have you walked into a room of strangers and begun to make judgments about people you barely know? Almost always those judgments are rooted in our own insecurities. If they are better looking or better dressed than us; if it's obvious they spend more money to have their hair cut than we do or they are more fit, then they must be privileged snobs, right? Or conversely, if they are not as handsome as we are

or worse dressed and their hair is unkempt or they are overweight or they have a ton of piercings or tattoos, then we are likely to make a whole other set of judgments. Before we choose to speak to them (or ignore them) we have sized them up—maybe correctly and maybe not correctly.

My first job in ordained ministry was in campus ministry, at Central Connecticut State University in New Britain, Connecticut. Hathy and I lived on the second floor of a triple-decker house a couple of miles from campus. Sometimes at night you could hear gunshots—something neither of us had any experience with in our growing up years. You could also hear Keith and Nancy screaming at each other if he'd been out later than expected and had too much to drink, which was a semi-regular occurrence. When we moved from there to Westport, Connecticut, we found single-family homes bigger than triple-deckers, but no triple-deckers.

At first one might be tempted to look around and feel like this must be heaven—with all the beautiful people. But, of course, it wasn't, and one of the great gifts of pastoral ministry is the lesson learned over and over again when you are invited to walk the journey with people from all walks of life: people are people wherever you go. No matter how much education or money (or how little of each) there is no protection from the very real challenges life brings. Wherever you go in this world, people get divorced, laid off, diagnosed with cancer, treated for depression, addicted to drug and alcohol. Wherever you go in this world people do their best to try to love better than they were loved themselves, to live more out of trust than fear, yearning for a word of hope rather than a word of judgment.

So what I see through John's eyes at least on this April night in the year of our Lord 2009 is that at the foot of the cross everything gets stripped away: it's like an onion with all the layers peeled away. Death makes us vulnerable, and no death more so than this one. But in so doing it also puts us into that thin place where we can see things much more clearly than we do when we are just going about our business—it invites us to see the world through a new set of lenses.

So Jesus looks on this day not just at the beloved disciple and his mother, but to each and every one of us who gather once more at the foot of the cross. In the love of God that radiates from the cross—we are invited to see one another as God sees us, and then to live into and out from that reality. *Behold, your mother, and behold your son. Behold your daughter and your father. Behold the family of God.*