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Roland Park Presbyterian Church
Palm/ Passion Sunday (Year B09)

Mark 11: 1-10
Mark 15: 1-20, 33-47

A Love That Endures All Things

Today is a strange day, this mixing of Palm and Passion, beginning in triumph and ending in tragedy. It is strange and yet it is somehow central to the meaning of our faith. The author of the Gospel of Mark lets us know how important he thinks it is. This is the first thing he has slowed down to tell us about in detail. The first two thirds of the Gospel breeze through almost all of Jesus' life and ministry, but the last third concentrates on just the last week and the cross. Why is that? Perhaps it is because Mark knows that the cross is somehow the defining moment for Jesus, the lens through which we can make sense of not only his life, but in some sense ours as well.

But before we get more into that I want to pause for a second and have us reflect on just how odd a symbol of faith the cross is. Have you ever considered how strange it is to have the cross in center place in worship, this tool of violence? The cross had a significant place among Jesus' contemporaries as a symbol of Roman power and oppression. It was a reminder of the dire consequences of opposing the Romans. One of the things we lose in reading the Gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion is how commonplace this scene is. We often receive the impression that Jesus' punishment is special, that he is singled out. That's simply not the case. Certainly Jesus' execution drew special attention from his followers and those who had been touched by his life and ministry, but beyond that it probably didn't register as front page news. Hundreds of people were killed in this exact same fashion every month.

It is quite possible for us to miss how commonplace this type of execution was in its time. It is harder, once we get into the story, to miss the violence it entails. For most of the year the cross can take center place as a Christian symbol without us batting an eye, but at the time of the year when we recall Jesus' passion it is hard to ignore it, although we still may try. But imagine if we had an electric chair take center place in our chancel. Essentially, that is what the cross is. That is why I say it is so strange to have it as the central symbol of our faith.

What do we do with this violence? There are those that blend it right into their theology. They talk about Jesus' death as the atoning sacrifice for human sin. They talk about God's need to exact punishment in order to maintain justice or holiness. God cannot simply let humans off the hook for sin, it has to be dealt with and the punishment for sin is death. In this understanding of the meaning on the cross Jesus is sent to take the place of humanity and endure the punishment that we deserve so that we can be set free from the consequence of our sin. This model takes into account the violence of Jesus' death, but it presents us with a fairly disturbing picture of a god who would sanction such violence. God demands justice and so has to punish someone. So instead of punishing those who deserve it, God sends Jesus who does not deserve it to take our place. The question this model poses is "if God loves us and makes the rules in the first place, why does God need to punish anyone, let alone sacrifice Jesus who is innocent?"

If you get nothing else out of today's message, I hope you go away knowing that the New Testament has multiple ways of understanding, talking about and explaining Jesus' death on the cross. The Bible doesn't present any one way, but rather gives us a framework for understanding and exploring the meaning of Jesus' death. The

scriptures contain no less than four different perspectives on the Gospel in general and the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross in particular. Matthew and Mark's are the most similar, although not identical. In general, both portray Jesus as broken and abandoned at the end. Luke's version varies quite a bit from Matthew and Mark. It portrays Jesus as gentle and forgiving. John's account is completely different than the other three. John portrays Jesus as strong, defiant and in charge of his fate at all times, even at the very end. Any attempt to harmonize these four accounts is pointless. They are four alternative readings of the same event that, though different from one another, are all faithfully told. Early Christians could have decided on one and put the other three aside, but they did not.

And this doesn't even include Paul who wrote the majority of the rest of the New Testament. Paul uses a whole range of metaphors in talking about the cross. He did this partly because he was talking to different audiences and so used different tools to help them understand, but he also did it to emphasize different aspects of the work of God in and through Jesus. Personally I think that Paul was at his best in a passage where he doesn't even name Jesus or identify the cross: I Corinthians 13. The particular verses that I am thinking of are on the front of your bulletin: *Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.* Paul is not speaking here of a romantic notion of love, but a religious one. He is talking about the love that we can know, experience and share through God, the love that was full on display in the person of Jesus.

How does this relate to the cross? Perhaps it was God's love through Jesus and not some need for vengeance or repayment for sin that resulted in the cross. One preacher has said, "Sometimes I think that the suffering of Jesus was not God's will at all. It seems entirely possible to me that God's will for Jesus was a long and fruitful life, brimming over with the divine justice and love he was born to embody. When the world opposed that justice, however—when the world reviled that love—God's will did not give Jesus license to stop being Jesus. God's will supported him to go on doing justice and loving mercy even in the face of deadly opposition. So in that sense, I suppose, it was God's will that Jesus suffer and die—since suffering and death turned out to be the unavoidable consequences of being who he was. It was God's will for Jesus to be fully who he was every day of his life—even if the fullness of that life shortened the length of it."¹ So perhaps it is not God who insists on the cross, but us.

I read a very thought provoking blog this week on this very idea. The title of the post was Sin Kills God. The author writes, "maybe Jesus died not *for* sin, but *as a result* of sin...when God enters into our presence and disrupts what we believe to be order, our instinct is to...get rid of that which is causing the disruption."² This line of thinking has a lot of support from the Gospel accounts. There are those that want to pin blame for Jesus' death on the Jewish crowds or on Judas, but the truth of the story, when we pay close attention to it we can see that those most responsible are those with the most to lose. Yet apparently part of the point seems to be that we all have something at stake because by the end all the major players equally rejected Jesus, whether actively or passively. Even Jesus' disciples, his closest friends, were

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor: http://www.explorefaith.org/themes/easter/taylor_1.html

² Drew Tatusko: <http://notes-from-offcenter.com/2009/03/30/sin-kills-god-why-jesus-had-to-die/>

threatened by the way of living in relationship to God and one another he revealed and so ended up abandoning or denying him.

As such, the cross is our “No” to God. In many ways *it is* a symbol of violence, but it is important to remember that the violence it reveals is ours not God’s. It is a reminder of what we are capable of and our proclivity to exclude and even destroy that which disrupts us and threatens our stake on the world as it is. But if that were all it revealed it would not be a fitting symbol for faith. What makes it an appropriate symbol of faith is that while it is a reminder of our “No” to God, it is also a symbol of God’s “Yes” to us, despite our “No.” Not “Yes” to our ways of violence and destruction, but “Yes” to us as created in God’s image. It reveals that the sole, driving motivator of God toward us is love, the kind of love Paul describes in I Corinthians 13; the kind of love Jesus displayed his whole life long, even up until its violent end. It shows us that there is another way beside that of power and domination and it even shows us exactly how that way will win out over violence and death in the end: *Love is patient...It does not insist on its own way... It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.* If anything strikes us as strange about this day and its message perhaps we need to consider that it does so because in many ways we are still strangers to this way of love that is willing to simply outlast everything that might oppose it, including in us.