

That wonderful and sacred mystery

Good Friday Sermon

April 19, 2019

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In the Name of One God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Many of us have seen the haunting images from Paris:

First, there were the crowds of people looking up at Notre Dame Cathedral as it burned before their eyes, singing together that ancient hymn, Ave Maria.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and in the hour of our death.

In the hour of our death. Pray for us.

In the hour of the death of our church. Pray.

In the hour of the death of our hope and subconscious expectation. Pray for us.

In the hour of the death of your son. Pray...

Then, we may have seen the image taken hours after the fire– the golden cross shining brightly over the altar and the still smoldering heap of ashes that was once the roof of the cathedral.

Maybe, like others from around the world, we felt comfort when we saw the cross still shining. Maybe we just felt grief. Or nothing at all.

I was thinking of that golden cross when I wrote this sermon.

And I was thinking of other crosses I have known – crosses of distress and anguish – crosses that don't necessarily shine brightly like the cross in that Cathedral, but - through the mercy and grace of God - spread their light just the same.

What are we to make of those crosses. How are we to respond?

French theologian and priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, thought about it this way:

“Christians are not called to swoon in the shadow of the cross,” he said, “but to climb in its light.”

I read this quote this week and I think this is an interesting distinction and a solid perspective.

But I wondered what it looks like – in real life.

What would climbing in the light of the cross look like?

Today? Here?

Now? In our world.

... And then I read about what happened in the days following the burning of the Cathedral in Notre Dame.

I read about the outpouring of love, support and solidarity from around the world – not only for Notre Dame - but for three Black churches in Louisiana, terrifyingly set on fire by a young white man accused of arson and hate crimes.

“When Mount Pleasant Baptist Church in Opelousas, La., caught fire on April 4, consuming the church’s interior, it was the third predominantly black church to burn down in St. Landry Parish in the span of 10 days.

On March 26, flames reduced St. Mary Baptist Church in Port Barre to just a few walls and piles of rubble.

And on April 2, a blaze struck the Greater Union Baptist Church in Opelousas.”

“My church has a lot of history,” the Rev. Gerald Toussaint of Mount Pleasant Baptist said, noting that it was more than 140 years old. “I don’t understand it. What could make a person do that to a church?”

Of course many, looking back to our nation’s history of racism and violence, know the answer all too well.

We have seen churches burning.

We have seen crosses burning.

And thus we know the refrain, “at least no one was hurt” is cliché’ and misguided - especially - though not exclusively – when the fire is set on purpose – and comes from a heart smoldering in rage.

Of course church *buildings* are just that. Buildings.

But *churches* are people.

Churches are the body of Christ.

You burn a church and you are crucifying Christ all over again.

Seeing Jesus Christ on the cross is horrifying. It’s sick. It’s gruesome. It’s dark.

Yet....“Christians are not called to swoon in the shadow of the cross, but to climb in its light.”

How, again, is this possible?

Rev Toussaint of Mount Pleasant Baptist continues, reminding us once again through his words: “the church is not that building. The church is the people.”

“We can rebuild the building as long as we stay together.”

“If we stay together as a congregation,” he said, “the church is alive and well.”

If we stay together.

If we stand together.

If we stand for one another.

If we are Christ for each other.

Within our own congregations and far beyond them...

If we ARE the church of Christ crucified, we are a church of glory, hope and light – and this church can’t be contained by walls.

Here in the Episcopal Church we have a prayer for the church –
for the whole body of Christ –
for those of us gathered together here at Saint Clement,
for our neighbors gathering together to worship elsewhere in Alexandria,
for our sisters and brothers from Mount Pleasant Baptist Church, St. Mary Baptist
Church, Greater Union Baptist Church,
for the people of Emanuel AME church in Charleston, SC and
for all those who love the Notre Dame Cathedral and what it stands for,
for the one holy catholic and apostolic church...

For the whole church universal - we have this prayer and we will pray it shortly:

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole
church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your
providence, carry out in tranquility that plan of salvation; let the whole world see
and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which
had grown old are being made new, and that all things being brought to their
perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our
Lord...

God from God, Light from Light,

True God from true God,

Begotten, not made...

In the days since the Notre Dame Cathedral burned, and as of the writing of this
sermon yesterday afternoon, over 36,000 people from all over the world have raised
almost 2 million dollars to rebuild the churches in Louisiana.

“Christians are not called to swoon in the shadow of the cross, but to climb in its
light.”

When we look at the cross of Jesus Christ, when we see Jesus crucified over and over again – in our lives - our world - right here and right now, what do we see?

Where do we stand in relationship to the cross - and to Christ's call to climb into its light?

In the Passion narrative we just heard there are only four people who position themselves at the foot of the cross. Close your eyes and see them standing there.

John writes,

“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.”

John's is the only Gospel narrative that has these four standing at the foot of the cross (all the others state Jesus' friends and family were “at some distance” away).

As he looks down from the cross, Jesus entrusts his mother and the Beloved Disciple into one another's care.

As one writer states, “In this simple act, Jesus sows the seeds of the new community to come, in which family is redefined in ways that are not restricted to blood kin and in which members of that family are called to be responsible caretakers of one another (Lenora Tubbs Tisdale in *Feasting on the Word* 303).”

This simple act.

Jesus spoke nine simple words.

And, just as the creator speaks all of creation into being, Jesus - in these words - tinged with longing and sorrow – speaks the church into being.

What if those four had not positioned themselves so near to the cross to hear those words. What if they chose not to follow Jesus' direction?

Would our whole church, this wonderful and sacred mystery, have become the Body of Christ on earth?

Would the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made?

...

What about us?

Where do we stand?

In relationship to the cross?

To those horrifying things we witness, we experience.

Here and now.

In the smoldering ruins of our hopes and dreams, where and with whom do we stand?

Do we stand with one another, link our arms together, and sing?

Do we stand with one another, link our arms together and say – “you are safe here with me.”

Do we see the pain halfway around the world and decide in that moment to address the pain in our own backyard?

Or the pain in our hearts –

by emptying ourselves –

in love –

to one another?

Where were you standing when Christ was crucified?

Where are you standing now?

Open your eyes and look around you – who is standing with you?

And into whose care is Jesus Christ entrusting you?

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility that plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord...

Amen.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/04/06/fires-struck-black-churches-days-southern-louisiana-authorities-think-its-suspicious/?utm_term=.85b994d58055

Also took all the inspiration for this sermon from David Schlafer's book: What makes this day different. Thanks David 😊