

Sermon #1,257: St. John 19:15-18

3-29-17, Lent 4 Midweek, Bethany-Princeton MN

(Hymns: 292.1-5, 378.7-8, 296, 481.1-3; Kingo: "Behold the Man")

FOR THEE I STRIVE AND WRESTLE

The Text, St. John 19:15-18. ¹⁵ But they cried out, "Away with Him, away with Him! Crucify Him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar!" ¹⁶ Then he delivered Him to be crucified. So they took Jesus and led Him away. ¹⁷ And He, bearing His cross, went out to a place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha, ¹⁸ where they crucified Him, and two others with Him, one on either side, and Jesus in the center. Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth.

Abba, dear Father, help me that I may worship You in spirit and truth and worthily render thanks to You, through Your Son Jesus Christ, for having so undeservedly blessed me and helped me this day. Open to me Your bosom, that I flee for safety from all my enemies to Your loving and fatherly heart, and satisfy my soul in the love which You have revealed in Your Son, who was delivered up for my sins and was raised again for my justification. May His strength be made perfect in my weakness, and may I find healing in His wounds. Cleanse my conscience from all dead works, so that when morning comes I may serve you in faith and love, and draw from You, as the true fountain, the gifts of grace, strength, and blessing unto every good work. Go with me as I lie down to rest. Give Your holy angels charge to surround my bed, that I may peacefully slumber and be content, however You will lead me. Amen. (ELH p. 170, *Prayer for Wednesday evening; additions from the Prayer for Friday Morning*)

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ, who died for you:

There's a scene in the *The Fellowship of the Ring*, which first was a book by J.R.R. Tolkien and then a movie, that mirrors this scene before us in Jesus' Passion. It's when there is a council of the scattered bands of those who have been resisting the evil lord for years. Their discussion degenerates into old prejudices and grudges; their voices rise, competing to be heard over each other. At this moment Frodo the hobbit steps forward unnoticed; he says: "I will take the ring, though I do not know the way."

For those who have read the books, this is an emotional moment because we know what he will face on that way, that road. He becomes the target of all the forces of evil, he will receive an incurable wound, his burden will weigh him down so low he can't remember his home, he will be oppressed by darkness and weakened so that he can't go on and a friend must carry him in order to carry the burden a short way. In the end he gains the victory, but at great cost. That's the way that lies before him.

I believe this scene is the author Tolkien's way of explaining the truth behind what we hear tonight in the Passion.

The contest of wills between Pontius Pilate and the Jews had grown to a fever pitch. Pilate tried every scheme to find a way to get Jesus released. The Jews countered by stirring up a mob. In order to slake their thirst for blood, Pilate brought out an unsavory, reprehensible criminal, dripping with venom and insolence, defiant of God's law, irreverent and repugnant, for him to be punished and Jesus released. The Jews responded by asking to let this Barabbas go free, not Jesus. They started the "*Crucify Him!*" chant. Pilate was shocked, but he tried again to release Jesus. Then they shouted, "**Away with Him, away with Him! Crucify Him!**" Pilate tried to shout over them, "**Shall I crucify your King?**" At this point the chief priests utter the ultimate self-humiliation, accepting the authority of Rome under which every Jew chafed: "**We have no king but Caesar.**" All these angry voices, competing in volume, producing a cacophony of noise, disharmony, and ugliness.

What was unnoticed by everyone - because it was happening from eternity in God's secret council - is that God so arranged things that Pilate "**delivered Him to be crucified.**" This is what it means that Jesus is the Lamb "*slain from the foundation of the world*" (Rev 13:8). We wonder how, since it was on Good Friday, not in eternity, that Jesus was killed.

In eternity it was ordained to happen this way. Pilate and the Jews are simply the human instruments of God's eternal decree being carried out. When we hear that "**he delivered Him to be crucified,**" this is Jesus stepping forward and saying: "*I will take it, though I do not know the way*" - for in truth, walking the valley of the shadow of death was unknown to Him. What did He take? The whole burden of everyone's sin.

It is just one verse in John's gospel – **“So they took Jesus and led Him away. And He, bearing His cross, went out to a place called ... Golgotha”** – but there is so much there. Even if you added the details from the other gospels, about Simon of Cyrene, the women of Jerusalem, and the unspoken details, the other criminals, how the soldiers pushed Jesus along, derisive shouts from the crowd, etc., it doesn't scratch the surface.

Because, beneath the surface is everything that matters. The burden Jesus carried was not made of wood. It was made of your sin.

Your sins are the debts you owe to God: the things you should have done but didn't do, and the things you shouldn't have done but still did. You can't erase them. You can't make up for them. The pile of sins grows and grows, even just in one day. Your sins are a burden all on their own. You know your sins committed in thought, word, and deed. You can try to ignore them but they don't just go away. Your sins follow you. You carry them with you. Carrying the burden of your sins makes everything harder. Everything is an effort because of the burden you carry around.

So you struggle to have enjoyment, to be content, to show unconditional love, to carry out your duties in the home, at work, and in the world with a free heart, because into all these interactions you carry such a burden. Sometimes you feel life is a burden, or you feel that your duties are, and then feeling guilty that you think that way only adds to it. Sometimes you feel that it is all too much, you can't handle it, that you have too much on your shoulders, that you never do it well enough or there is always more and you're never done. Oh for a burden-less life!

So Jesus steps forward and says, *“I will take it.”* He takes it from you. He lifts it off of your shoulders, all your burden of sin, all the weight of it. He willingly took this burden. He became a Burden – the burden that the donkey bore on Palm Sunday, and also the Burden of the cross. It weighed Him down, so low He could hardly even remember His home in glory with the Father where He was loved and not forsaken. Bearing this burden weakened Him so that they must find a friend for Him in Simon of Cyrene who carried the wood of the cross a short way. That happened on the road from Pilate's judgment hall to Golgotha. Simon carried none of the burden of sin, however. Only Jesus could carry that.

The gospels say that Simon bore the cross behind Jesus, who was bearing the true burden of all the sin of the whole world. Then Jesus was oppressed by the worst darkness, abandoned and forsaken by God the Father while He was on the cross. This is summed up in the words of the hymn verse that we sang, the real center and highlight of Luther's hymn:

*Thy Ransom I Myself will be;
For thee I strive and wrestle.*

He did the striving and wrestling for you, all of it! So stop striving and struggling! That is the mission of other religions, to strive and wrestle and work your way into God's good graces. Jesus has done all the work for you. He has taken your burden and borne it. He, the only innocent one, bears all your sin. In the words of the hymn, Jesus says:

*Life shall from death the vict'ry win;
My innocence shall bear thy sin;
So art thou blest forever.*

He received His own incurable wound. He is seen in heaven as the wounded Lamb, and those dear tokens of His Passion – His wounds – still His dazzling body bears. They are the signs that there is no burden for you to bear. "So art thou blest forever." He brings you into God's presence forgiven, innocent for His sake, no debt to pay for He paid it all, and all you receive is blessing from God. He gives you His yoke that is easy and His burden that is light as a feather. How well you do it is not the issue. He has done all things well for you. So all your duties are not burdens, nothing is on your shoulders, but Christ handles it all for you, and in Christ they are turned into works of love that He wants and that are perfectly acceptable to God for Jesus' sake. Amen!