



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

HAMMERS AND NAILS

Sermon for Good Friday, March 25, 2016

Hammers and nails haven't changed much. What we use now was pretty much what they used then. Iron nails, iron headed wood handle hammer. Wood post, wood beam. The cross was probably assembled with a mortise and tenon joint, the nails were saved for driving through and attaching the wrists and ankles. The body of the victim, hung on those nails, slowly suffocated as the weight collapsed the lungs. That's different. The flesh part. We don't do that much anymore. Crucify people. Though executions still go on. And old fashions sometimes return.

On Holy Tuesday Albert and I attended the annual Mass of Collegiality at the Cathedral of St John the Divine. During the luncheon afterward, Bishop Dietsche interrupted the conversations to announce terrible news. A priest of the Church of England had been captured by ISIS and they plan to crucify him on Friday. Later on, this was amended—and the situation is still unclear. But a terrible picture had been drawn; we all had a vivid image in our minds.

It doesn't take a lot of imagination to understand crucifixion. We have seen it presented in graphic form in a thousand churches, in whole galleries of European painting.

Some of the paintings and sculptures dwell with particular attention on the suffering of Christ. That is an aid to piety—to share the suffering of our Lord, who took upon himself our sins and those of all the world.

He was alone on the cross, though surrounded by a crowd beneath and flanked by two others. He was alone, even God seemed absent.

But on the ground the scene is different. I am thinking of a painting from Renaissance times, I think it is in the Met, though I can't recall the painter. Christ is on the cross, along with the two criminals, but the action is on the ground around him. Soldiers are playing dice for his cloak; some men are mocking him with leering smiles; others stand around talking, pointing. A centurion is aside his horse, looking at Jesus. They are, of course, dressed in the fashions of 15th century Italy.

Crowds milling around the scene of an execution don't change much either. I am also thinking of a postcard of a lynching circa 1920 somewhere down south. A burnt black body hangs from a tree. A crowd of white people mills around, clearly enjoying the occasion. Some are laughing, others are lounging in the shade, straw hats jauntily cocked. There are youngsters playing off to the side.

What is it to kill someone? To punch or slap, to wound and ridicule, to whip and torture, to hang or crucify or shoot or burn or behead? To administer a lethal injection. To push a button on a missile delivery system loaded onto a drone flying unseen half a world away. What is to kill for good or evil?

And what was it like for God, come into our world, made flesh in Christ, to be on the receiving end of human wrath? The fist, the whip, the hammers and nails. So this is what it is like, perhaps God thought. And the veil on the temple was torn in two, and the earth shook and the sky darkened. It was a close call. God's wrath was on the very edge of being unleashed.

But the one on the cross said no. "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do."

Only the one on the cross can forgive the ones who put him there. Only the one on the lynching tree has a right to say what should happen to the ones who strung him up. What would you say if that was your son or father, mother or daughter up there?

"Love your enemies and pray for them," Jesus told his disciples.

There is a level of barbarity and evil happening in Syria and Iraq these days that boggles the mind. The kind of evil and complete loss of humanity that swept through Rwanda during the tribal madness that broke out there, that was horribly institutionalized and mechanized in Nazi Germany against the Jews and other scapegoats and enemies of the Reich.

The thousand year Reich, so Hitler boasted. But the reign was far less than that—though long enough to lead to the death of fifty million people in a total world war.

I don't think the numbers have ever been completely counted of those killed in North America by people of European descent through the forceful displacement of the indigenous peoples and the transport and enslavement of people of African descent; many millions I think. No one is innocent who lives in this prosperous country, especially those who are privileged through being perceived as "white." For despite the lofty battlement of our ideals of liberty and equality, the land was settled and the economy was built on the foundation of these original sins.

And the same is true over all the world. Digging through history makes all hands dirty. No one is innocent, sang the Psalmist, no, not one.

Except one. Of the three men who died this day on Golgotha, outside the walls of Jerusalem, one was innocent, a pure victim, a true sacrifice.

And he was the one who asked God to forgive his enemies. Forgive the ones who shouted Hosanna on Sunday and crucified him on Friday morning. Like we did last Sunday in ritual form.

I know it is always hard to hear that we are sinners who deserve the consequences of our sins, just punishment and separation from God.

Perhaps this is the one day that I feel able myself to say it from a pulpit. But I can say it and hear it because I am free and beloved and saved, through the blood of the one on the cross. Remember that when you nail your cross together after the service.

Amen.

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