

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My sermon text this evening is a verse from St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, Chapter Three, verse thirteen:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us -- for it is written, "Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree..." (Galatians 3:13, RSV)

I am drawn to this verse because I think it helps us to understand both the anguish and the magnificence of what happened this day so long ago, Good Friday.

For, you see, the great drama of Good Friday is not that Jesus suffered innocently, but that he suffered guilty! He had become a curse. It would be a tragedy if Jesus had suffered though undeserving of it, but that is not what St. Paul is saying. The apostle is saying that Jesus suffered because in the eyes of God and reality, he was a curse. It is a very poor summation of a human life: to say that that life is a curse, to be hanged and done away with.

I am urging us, then, to take the words of St. Paul literally: Christ was "made a curse for us." The apostle is speaking of nothing so mild as a mistake or a pretending. He is not saying that Christ hanged on a tree *as if* he were cursed, but more radically, *because* he was a curse.

To bring this thought home and down to earth, I mean this, sorrowful as it is to say: Christ died on the Cross because Christ was Gregory! He was me, and I got what I deserved.

St. Paul repeats his theme about Christ becoming a curse in his Second Letter to the Corinthians:

For our sake he made him *to be sin* who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.(2 Corinthians 5:21, RSV).

Again, St. Paul is saying nothing so mild as God made Christ to be *as if* he had sinned, but more simply: God made Christ *to be sin*.

At Christmastime, we rejoiced that the only begotten Son of God was willing to be incarnate in our humanity and wrapped up in our human flesh. Now, on Good Friday, we must wrap him up in our sins and our death.

Martin Luther believed that the doctrine of Christ being made a curse was the most joyous of all doctrines and the one that contains the most comfort for us poor sinners. When Luther contemplated Good Friday and what happened to Jesus on that awful and awesome day, Luther was led to these words:

[The merciful Father] sent His Son into the world, heaped all the sins of all men upon Him, and said to Him: "Be Peter the denier; Paul the persecutor,

blasphemer, and assaulter; David the adulterer; the sinner who ate the apple in Paradise; the thief on the cross. In short, be the person of *all* men, the one who has committed the sins of all men. And see to it that You pay and make satisfaction for them.”¹

You and I were made for good works. It is a chief apostolic teaching about us:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10, RSV)

That is our nature, that is our purpose: we were created for good works, that we might walk therein. It was our Maker’s hope for us from the very beginning: we were granted god-like freedom, that we would accompany our Maker in a steady stream of goodness. In his vast creation... in this universe of worlds upon worlds, galaxies upon galaxies, creatures among multitudes of creatures, we were to be the ones who used our freedom to adorn this world with goodness.

But look at what we’ve done! Not only is our poor planet overloaded with suffering, pollution, and dreadful danger of human making, but we ourselves, one by one, have failed too often to do the good we should have done and done the wrong we ought to have shunned.

And so on that first Good Friday, the merciful Father said to his dear Son: “Be thou Gregory! Wrap thyself up in his weakness and in his sins, else the man has no hope.”

It is quite a come-down for this to be so: for Jesus, who knew no sin, who never failed to choose the good, to be me. Alas, it is more than a humiliation for Jesus that this should so. It is more along the lines of an anguish. To be wrapped in my sins and to be the bearer of my biography, it must have burned the very soul of that innocent one, Jesus. There was a crown of thorns piercing his brow, there were nails driven through his wrists and ankles, there were the marks of the whip on his back, there was the depletion of strength in every cell of his body, and the jangling of pain in every nerve. But perhaps this was most alien of all to him: that on the Cross, Jesus became Gregory, Jesus became Peter, became Judas, became you! Jesus was made a curse.

But he did this thing! He took on our sins, that we might be innocent once again. His innocence was pressed down with the guilt of the entire world, and he became cursed that we might escape being cursed.

It is a fortunate exchange for us, a blessed exchange. Luther puts the matter this way:

...if sin makes you anxious, and if death terrifies you, just think that this is an empty specter and an illusion of the devil—which is what it surely is. For in fact there is no sin any longer, no curse, no death, and no devil, because Christ has conquered and abolished all these... If I look at my own person or at that of my neighbor, the church will never be holy. But if I look at Christ, who is the Propitiator and Cleanser of the church, then it is completely holy;

¹ Luther’s *Commentary on Galatians*, on Galatians 3:13.

for He bore the sins of the entire world.²

It has been a year now since we last gathered for Good Friday. I know many of you and I know something of the good you have accomplished during this time. You have been a joy to look upon.

But also I know something of the human heart, and I suspect that each of us could bow our heads before the ancient saying of Isaiah and acknowledge the truth of his words:

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:6, KJV)

We might not thoroughly understand the Church's teaching of the substitutionary death of Christ, according to which he bore on the Cross the penalty of death our sins deserved. But my concern as a pastor is not so much that you or I *understand* this great doctrine, but that we *honor* it by being happy again.

Guilt presses down on some of you. Failure weighs down on some of you. Consciousness of missed opportunities troubles some of you. Shame over how you have treated others discourages you.

But the best way to honor Good Friday is to take it to heart that you have been given a second chance. All that guilt, failure, and shame have enwrapped Jesus on the Cross. And he was willing that it would be so, because that is how precious you are to him.

And best of all, Easter is right around the bend. Best of all, you are not lonely in your second chance, for this Jesus who counts you precious has been raised by the Father so that he can go forward in life with you. A new day is ahead of us. Let us use it well, to the benefit of our neighbor, and to the glory of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

² Ibid.