Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/29/2015, Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday
Mark 14:1—15:47

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

18 And as they sat and did eat, Jesus said, Verily I say unto you, One of you which eateth with me shall betray me. 19 And they began to be sorrowful, and to say unto him one by one, Is it I? and another said, Is it I? (Mark 14:18-19, KJV)

Let me begin my sermon this morning with a New York City kind of story. It is a story, I fear, that will cause many of us to flinch midway through it, but which will also cause many of us to nod our heads in agreement by the end of the story. Lutheran theologian Gilbert Meilaender relates this passing scene in his recent collection of sermons Meditations on Christ’s Words from the Cross.¹ The story goes this way:

There is a Jewish philosopher named Michael Wyschogrod, a quite elderly man by now, and a very fine scholar who has written important and, indeed, profound essays about Jewish-Christian relations. A few years ago I was at a meeting in which Wyschogrod, who lives in New York City, was also a participant. And at one point he told a story, which, at least on his telling, went like this:

He and his wife were riding the subway and had gotten off at (I think it was) the 181st Street exit. It’s an exit that is quite deep underground, and you have to ride an elevator up to ground level. The elevator was packed with people, and Wyschogrod and his wife—both quite elderly—were almost the last people on. Just after them, and the very last person to squeeze in at the last second before the door closed, was a rather wild-looking and disheveled man, clearly somewhat drunk.

The door closed, and the elevator began to ascend. The man turned to Wyschogrod (who would, of course, have been wearing his yarmulke, which would clearly identify him as Jewish). The man turned to him and said rather loudly, “Why did you Jews kill our Lord?”

And Wyschogrod replied: “It wasn’t only the Jews. It was all of us, all of our sins, that killed Jesus.” To which the man said, “yes, that’s true.” And other people on the elevator broke out in

¹ http://alpb.org/meditations.html
agreement. “Yes, all of us, all our sins, we drove the nails into his hands.”

And then Professor Meilaender gives this note:

It would be good if all Christians were as ready with the right response as this Jewish philosopher was. For surely it was all of us, all our sins, that killed Jesus.

Or, as that beautiful hymn “Ah, Holy Jesus” puts it:

Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee.
’Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee;
I crucified thee. (LBW 123)

I think that we all know and believe this — that you and I through our sins “hath undone thee.” We have played our part in this drama that led to the death of Jesus. It was not just for the sins of that early generation that Jesus suffered. It was not just for the sins of Peter, James, and John, and the rest back then, but also for our sins too that Jesus was willing to go to the cross. Saint Paul gives the maximum extension of this by speaking of the sins of “the world”:

…in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them...(2 Corinthians 5:19, RSV)

Are we part of the world? Indeed, we are! We are among the sinners for whom Jesus died. We have played our part in nailing Jesus to the cross. Every time we sin, there goes another nail. Or rather, there goes the cause of those original nails — a cause for which Jesus was willing to die. So let us try to sin less!

**Shifting the Focus a Little**

But what I want to do in this sermon is to shift the focus a little. I still want to talk about the connection between the cross of Christ and you and me here in New York City in the year of our Lord 2015. Still, I want to speak of the old rugged cross and of us modern folk. But this time I want to say that there is a connection between the wounds of Jesus on the cross, and our own wounds. For you and I come trailing along right behind Jesus when it comes to suffering. He suffered on the cross. But his suffering on the cross does not spare us from suffering too in some real measure. It is a subject on the heart of many a pastor. We know the burdens that many of you bear. We know something of the heartaches you have been through. We know something of your hopes and dreams, fears and regrets,
disappointments and weariness. And on this day dedicated to our Lord’s passion, I hope you will find some comfort in what Isaiah of old said about the Suffering Servant’s stripes:

> But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5, RSV)

The stripes of Jesus heal our stripes. The wounds of Jesus heal our wounds. The miseries of life are not somehow unconquerable, as if they are tyrants who can never be overthrown. No, the wounds of Christ on Golgotha’s cross mean that one day our own wounds are going to be healed. Our sorrows are going to pass. “With his stripes we are healed.”

**“In the Cross of Christ I Glory”**

A few Sundays back in this season of Lent, one of our dear church members greeted me at the end of the liturgy with tears in her eyes because of the hymns that day. She said, “Pastor, I hardly even remember your sermon today. It was the hymns that moved me.” And I said “Amen!” to that. It was the hymns that moved me too that day.

One of those hymns is one we are singing today too: “In the Cross of Christ I Glory.” Especially let me lift up verse four for you:

> Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure,  
by the cross are sanctified;  
peace is there that knows no measure,  
joys that through all time abide. (LBW 104)

That word “bane” is an old-fashioned word. But no problem! I have me an old-fashioned dictionary — a volume I love, a facsimile edition of Noah Webster’s 1828 First Edition of *An American Dictionary of the English Language*. There we find that the word “bane” is connected with an old Saxon word meaning “murderer” and to Greek, Latin, and French words having to do with “poison.” So Noah Webster’s definition of “bane” goes this way:

> Poison of a deadly quality; hence, any fatal cause of mischief, injury or destruction; as, vice is the bane of society.

Vice injures society — injures it in a fatal way.

So, let’s return to the remarkable claim of the hymn:

> Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure,
by the cross are sanctified;

Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure are strong human realities. Two of them are terrible — bane and pain — and two of them are great — blessing and pleasure. Let me speak of the first two: bane and pain. It seems right to do so on this day, Palm Sunday, when we focus on the Passion of our Lord Jesus.

If you know these things in your life — bane and pain — then you are struggling with realities that are holding you down, poisoning life for you — perhaps quite physically, as in cancer, or perhaps spiritually, as in loneliness or disappointments. Jesus bears his cross today, and collapses under the weight of it, until they drag him up and crucify him on that cross. But many of you, my friends, know something of suffering too. Easter does not yet mean the end of pain and heartache for you.

But if you have thrown in your lot with Jesus then, as the hymn says, your sorrow and sufferings are “by the cross sanctified.” What can this mean? It sounds good and hopeful, so let’s try to say a little more it.

To say that something is “sanctified” means that it is made “holy” — holy, not just in the sight of people, but holy in the sight of God himself. Indeed, the bane and pain in your life might not be much noticed by other people, but they are noticed by God. There is no misery that comes upon you, nor weight on your life long endured, that God does not know about and care about with great earnestness. Indeed, this is what the cross of Christ is about. By his cross our crosses are sanctified. They can no longer be considered random blows from an indifferent universe. Rather, they are the sorrows and sufferings that your Maker is determined to overturn for you, even if it costs Jesus his own life.

**Both undeserved and deserved**

And note this: much of the bane and pain in our life comes to us undeserved. We didn’t do anything to deserve the cancer or the arthritis or the grief which we bear. It just came upon us in this tough world. But some of our suffering is deserved, and we know it, we confess it. We know that we played around too long with excessive eating, excessive drinking, explosive tempers, coolness of heart toward those we should have been cherishing, and in the end we lost much.

But all of these sorrows — both those undeserved and deserved — all of them are sanctified by the cross of Christ which we honor today. When Jesus dies on that cross, he does so because you need his help for your bane and pain, both undeserved and deserved. And the gospel is that Jesus died today so that you can live and have your sorrows healed.

…and with his stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5, RSV)

If Jesus be not risen, then it is a cold universe in which we live when it comes to bane and pain in a human life. But if he be risen, then the Great
Physician of body and soul lives and he is going to reach you eventually. On that you can count. In the end the cross of Christ means victory over bane and pain in your life! It is a theme that warms the heart of a pastor. It is a theme that I hope will warm your hearts too. Walk with Jesus, and wait and hope confidently for that victory, through his grace and merits, and to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.