

“Amateurs at Love”
Matthew 26: 36 - 49
Makemie Presbyterian Church
Palm Sunday, March 28, 2010

³⁶Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane;
and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.”

³⁷He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to
be grieved and agitated. ³⁸Then he said to them, “I am deeply
grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.”

³⁹And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and
prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not
what I want but what you want.”

⁴⁰Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and
he said to Peter, “So, could you not stay awake with me one hour?

⁴¹Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial;
the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

⁴²Again he went away for the second time and prayed, “My
Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.”

⁴³Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were
heavy. ⁴⁴So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the

third time, saying the same words. ⁴⁵Then he came to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

⁴⁷While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. ⁴⁸Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him.”

⁴⁹At once he came up to Jesus and said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” and kissed him.

This ends our reading.

There is a legend that on his famous trip to the Far East, the explorer Marco Polo was captured & brought before the dreadful conqueror Genghis Khan. Desperate for conversation, he began to tell the Khan the story of Jesus; straight out of the gospel according to Saint Matthew. Genghis Khan liked the story & listened attentively, much to Marco's relief, but as Marco Polo came to the events of Holy Week & told of Jesus' betrayal, trial, scourging, and crucifixion, his fearsome host became more & more agitated.

As soon as Marco Polo pronounced the words,
"And Jesus cried again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit,"
the Mongol exploded & demanded;

"What did the Christians' God do then?"

"Did he send his thousands of legions from heaven to smite &
destroy those who had so treated his son?"

Marco Polo's answer must have clearly disappointed the Khan, who remained unconverted, but I tell the tale to remind us how we hear this story. Of **course, we say**; God did not send any legions; that's not how the story goes. Jesus died on the cross for our sins & three days later was raised from the dead to show us that all who

believed in him wouldn't perish but have eternal life. Period. Silly Khan. Silly anyone who doesn't know the story.

But how well do we really know the story, we who have always known it? We have heard it a thousand times, but always with the last page, the victory, in mind. Who can remember the first time? Who can recall the suspense of the story, the shock, the outrage, the grief, the wonder?

Well, that's what we are asked to do this Holy Week, beginning today. Today we are asked to endure the story of the death of Jesus in living color, in gory detail & in the week to come we're asked to walk with him & his disciples every step of the way – with no knowledge of Sunday, no knowledge of empty tombs or resurrections, but only of gathering doom & threatening weather & the smell of death. We are asked to forget what we know & to follow our Lord to his wretched death without a clue what will happen next, because it is only then, when we have shared even a splinter of his cross, that he has anything more to offer us. It's our final Lenten discipline & it's hard, extremely hard. Not only because we do know what will happen next – the story is as familiar to us as the shape of our own hands – but

also because it is so very painful to make ourselves stop & notice it like someone who is seeing it all happen for the first time.

What a catalogue of grief it is, this morning's gospel that Alec just read. What an account of thorough failure at home & abroad, with friends & family as well as with those watching from a distance, beginning with Gethsemane. The word means "olive press," a device in which the fruit of the gnarled olive tree is crushed to produce fragrant oil. Jesus has just come from supper with his friends, where he has passed a cup of wine around & called it his blood. It might as well be a wine press in that garden, for the fruit of his short life is being crushed in fulfillment of the scriptures. Who knows what will come of it? "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me."

His disciples have seen Jesus sad before, but never afraid. He has always been their leader: the teacher, the rabbi, the miracle worker. What's come over him? Something dreadful, that he should turn to them for help.

"Stay awake with me," he asks them, but they cannot keep their eyes open. It's late & the Passover meal was sumptuous. So they sleep, certain that their chief remains in control, sure that no one can pull a fast one on the son of God. He wakes them before the

torches do, torches & a tangle of angry voices. Now the failures follow in quick succession: Judas' betrayal, the disciples' desertion, Peter's denials, the court's convictions, the crowd's choice of Barabbas.

And so it comes to pass that Jesus is scourged & hung upon the cross like a scarecrow. I didn't know the meaning of the word "scourge" but it is – a fistful of long leather strips, with a sharp metal spike knotted in the end of each one. And this is what a scourge can do; it flays the flesh to the bone. Jesus hung upon the cross, literally, a scarlet man whose life poured out of him in streams. But even at that he refused the blindfold, so to speak; he refused the cheap wine laced with myrrh that might have numbed him & let him die in a haze. He refused it & chose instead to stay alive with everything left in him, to feel everything he could feel, including the worst possible human pain, until he could feel no longer. If he asks us to do the same, it is because he knows there is no way around pain, only through it. That knowledge cost him a great deal, cost him so much that his last words in this life were, "My God, my God, why?"

And that is as far as we get, for this week at least.

If you are anything like me, the almost unbearable pain is the suspicion of my own participation in this gruesome drama.

It's a custom in many churches to read the passion narrative out loud on Palm Sunday, with someone playing Pilate's part, someone else playing Peter's, & the crowd – the congregation – playing itself. Our lines in the script are labeled "All," and what we are given to say is, "He deserves death," "Let him be crucified," and, dripping with sarcasm, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

The first time I read them out loud I feared for my life. "Crucify him!" I whispered, meaning to shout, and the words all but gagged me. Like all latter day saints blessed with retrospective piety, I could not believe that I would have said such a thing. But are the odds? The odds are that I too – like Judas, like Peter, like all the others who supped with Jesus & then abandoned him – would have turned tail and run for my life. Do you need proof? Then forget that Thursday in Gethsemane & examine last Thursday in Snow Hill. Did I love God with my whole heart? Love my neighbor as myself? Recognize Christ in everyone I met? Of course not. I went about my business, which is chiefly the business of self-preservation, as surely as Peter insisted, "I do not know the man."

But the point of all this is not to rub salt in my wounds or yours. Of course we betray him; of course we are sinners; of course we fall short of the glory of God.

But the very great, the very mysterious & most holy surprise is that Jesus takes that murderous fact & turns it into the occasion of our bond with him.

Let me speak plainly. Everything we have said up to this point is celebrated in the sacrament of holy communion, in which we are invited to eat the Lord's flesh & drink his blood. Is that sacrament something else we have learned by heart, so that we no longer really notice it? My friend Glenn noticed.

I have a friend Glenn Miller. No, not that one. Glenn is a sport's writer & back in the day, when I played a lot of softball, Glenn was my coach. We both worked for the St Petersburg newspaper. Well, Glenn is an "unchurched" person. Never been to church, never wanted to go, doesn't know any of the rituals, feels really uneasy about being in a church. So of course I invited him to go with me. It was a Sunday I was helping serve communion by intinction, you know where we come forward & dip the bread in the grape juice. I had explained to Glenn exactly that. So he was in line to come forward, rips off a

modest piece of bread & stands before me. I whispered to him, “the blood of Christ, the cup of salvation.”

And this look of terror comes over him. “Uh, no thanks,” he says pulling his hand back so quickly it catches the lip of the cup. Over goes the contents. Did I mention he had on a white shirt?

But how could I blame him? Who, without benefit of theological metaphor, would willingly drink from a cup full of anyone’s blood? Even though he knew it was only grape juice in the cup, his reaction was really a fully natural, fully sensible response of repulsion. What, we may wonder; did Jesus have in mind with a supper of his body & his blood?

For any first century Jew, the image had to be an awful one. God had been so clear in his revelations to the prophets that he took no pleasure in blood sacrifice, that he turned his back on the ritual slaughter of animals and innocents. The images of eating flesh and drinking blood were reserved for one’s worst enemies, for those whom you wished dead, or who wished you dead. How Judas must have squirmed in his seat, sure that the whole scene was being acted out to point the finger at him. But from anyone’s perspective, the whole idea was a scandal – that Jesus should bless those symbols of

death & persecution and then ask his friends to accept them as symbols of life and fellowship. It was crazy. It was a sad, bad joke. Or to look at it another way, it was as if he already knew what was about to happen to him, already knew that in the end he would walk alone to his death. It was his way of showing them ahead of time that he bore them no malice, that his love for them was stronger than death, and that he required no more of them than to be who they were, and to be loved by him.

It was as if he knew the truth about them, and about us – that we are amateurs at love, that we do fall asleep on him, and fail to answer his call for our help, and abandon him when the going gets tough. That is half the story. The other half is that knowing the truth about us does nothing to diminish his love of us. That is the whole story of the Last Supper, Holy Week, and the Passion. Whether or not we recognize our participation in Christ's death, the sacrament of holy communion lets us know that he does, and through it he also lets us know – gently, insistently, radically – that we are forgiven before we ever turn away from him. Which means that nothing can separate us from him, not guilt, not failure, not sorrow or remorse. All of those have been blessed ahead of time and turned into the food and drink

of forgiveness. What might have been just a bloody tragedy, with a bloody meal to commemorate it, has become for us the heart of our faith, the story and symbols of our co inheritance, our life within his life, our membership in his body. Because he forgives us before we ever turn away, the road back to him is always open. There is nothing finally in our way.

So, then will we keep him company this week and stay awake with him, and, forsaking our own comfort, walk with him as far as we can?

Today's gospel story ends bitterly. It leaves Christ dead upon the cross & while everything in us wants to rush ahead to the Easter affirmation that he is risen and he will come again, for this week at least we are asked to stay with him where he is. We are asked to share his story & his pain like someone who is experiencing it all for the first time – like Genghis Khan, like my friend Glenn – and to be hurt by it, and healed by it, and amazed. Amen? Amen.