

The St. John's Pulpit

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WHY?

Gospel of Matthew 27:45-46

Sermon 5 of 7 in Lenten Series

"Seven Words for Everyday: Jesus' Words from the Cross Empower Us for Everyday Living"

Sunday, April 2, 2017 – Fifth Sunday during Lent

The Rev. Dennis W. Foust, PhD, Senior Minister

Before your third birthday, you mastered the question, 'why?' You continue to ask 'why?' You seek to understand. You prefer answers. You contend against confusion. This coming week, count how many times you or someone else asks, 'why?'

One of my first challenges in pastoral ministry was a teenaged boy asking, "Why doesn't God heal my mother's multiple sclerosis?" I have heard parents ask 'why?' in the NICU as life support was turned off for their baby born without lung tissue. I have heard 'why?' standing at attention on an airport tarmac with parents of a twenty-year-old Marine as their son's flag draped casket returned from Iraq. I have heard 'why?' when girls have been raped and when college students have died from drug and alcohol abuse. I have heard, 'why?' in my years with you.

Jesus asked 'why?' while suspended upon the cross: "**My God, my God, WHY have you forsaken me?**" You are not facing death on a cross this week, but you may be asking 'why?' about an aspect of your life. What does Jesus' 'why?' on the cross show to you?

1. WHEN JESUS ASKED 'WHY?,' HE WAS SHOWING YOU HONEST FAITH.

The Gospel of Matthew says that Jesus cried out with a loud voice. In Aramaic, the language of his childhood, Jesus cried out, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani." His cry was a quotation of Psalm 22:1 – "My God, my God, for what reason have you forsaken me?" Psalm 22 ends in a proclamation of faith and then flows into Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd..."

Jesus felt forsaken; yet he knew that **feeling forsaken is not equal to being forsaken**. He cried out, "**My God, my God.**" There was still a relationship of faith in this darkest of hours. When Jesus asked, 'Why?,' he was showing an honest faith in his relationship with God.

‘Why?’ is asking, “*please explain*” or “*for what reason or purpose?*” In other words, we ask ‘why?’ because there must be an explanation, a reason or a purpose we are not seeing.

Like Jesus, we ask ‘why?’ We trust that God is present with us in the midst of our suffering. We try to catch glimpses of redeeming and reconciling grace along the way. When we confess our sin and when we renew our commitments to mature in discipleship, we express honest faith.

2. WHEN JESUS SAID, ‘WHY?,’ HE WAS TRUSTING THE WILL OF GOD.

Jesus died trusting God. He promised the thief ‘paradise.’ Some suggest Jesus had to die. I have never taught you that Jesus had to die. I do not teach that The Living God required Jesus’ death as a substitutionary atonement. In my reading and interpreting of the Gospels, Jesus did not die to appease an angry or legalistic God. Jesus died because he served a loving God. Jesus was a willing sacrifice to reveal God’s love; he chose to die. Jesus died because domination systems destroy those who publicly challenge them. Jesus was killed because of the sin of the world – and in his teachings and lifestyle practices, he revealed the will of God for humanity as well as the nature of The Living God. In the death of Jesus, we see how the love of God can redeem a horrific moment and how sacrificial love reconciles people to God and to one another.

This autumn, I will offer a study on the subject, ‘*The Will of God.*’ Our readings will include a short book written by Dr. Leslie Weatherhead. He discusses *The Intentional Will of God; The Circumstantial Will of God;* and *The Ultimate Will of God;* ICU. The Intentional Will of God is for people to relate humbly with God, love neighbor, do justice and express kindness. Yet, humans sin against the Intentional Will of God. So, the Circumstantial Will of God is true and faithful to God’s nature when people use their freedom to limit the freedoms of others, to sin against God or to cause pain and suffering in the world. The Ultimate Will of God is to redeem and reconcile all evil, suffering and sinfulness. To quote Weatherhead, “...not that everything that happens is God’s will, but that nothing can happen which finally defeats God’s will.”

Like Jesus, we trust The Living God is redeeming and reconciling offering hope and healing. We look at every life experience through Romans 8:28 believing The Living God wastes no actions; “*...all things work together for good for those who love God...*” We embrace the message of Romans 8:38, “*...neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things*

present, nor things to come, nor powers, ..., nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” ‘Why?’ is a question of honest faith seeking to understand the will of God! ‘Why?’ When we confess our sin and when we renew our commitments to mature in discipleship, we are trusting the will of God.

Beloved, remember the worst thing that could ever happen to you has already happened; and his grave is empty. We will celebrate the resurrection and our hope in two weeks. Therefore, we are Ministers of Hope in Daily Life.

WHAT CAN WE OFFER A WORLD THAT ASKS ‘WHY?’

Nourished by the bread and cup, you will soon depart this sanctuary to become God’s scattered Church. You will encounter people who are asking ‘why?’ You can offer them your honest faith, your trust in and your commitment to the will of God.

Beloved, I remind you that behind every ‘why?’ is a person asking the question. Expressing care for the person is more important than answering their question. People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care. We need to get to know the person and learn ‘why?’ they are asking ‘why?’

As you express your Ministry in Daily Life, you realize many people are not asking for information when they ask ‘why?’ They are wanting to be sure they have not been forsaken. They are asking for relief – relief from their fear, anxiety, guilt, shame, cynicism, etc. They are asking, ‘Why?’ do I feel forsaken? Why is my life empty of joy, meaning and purpose?

A woman announced to me that she did not believe in God. I asked her to describe the God in whom she did not believe. She had a long list of characteristics of a god that is unforgiving; narrow-minded; violence oriented; hates LGBTQ persons; wants to wipe out all other religious views other than the most bigoted, etc. I told her that I did not believe in that God either. I asked her what adults in her life had taught this view of God to her. She said, “*every adult in my family and my church.*” I began explaining my understanding of The Loving God revealed by Jesus. After a few minutes, she smiled and confessed, “*I wish I had grown up with that God.*”

As you listen to the lives of others, they need you to be Christ’s Church to them; sharing with them your honest faith and your trust in the will of The Loving God so they do not feel forsaken in all of the ‘why?’ moments of their lives. This is your mission and your commitment. Amen.