

Good Friday
March 25, 2016
St. Pauls - Peoria, Illinois
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What happened on this day?

We gather today under a huge cross. We mark a cross on our bodies. We wear crosses. We decorate with crosses.

At the core of our life together is the shape of an ancient execution device, one specifically used to humiliate and isolate its victim from any decent member of society and to strip away the last bit of dignity and humanity from the final moments of life.

For a moment, imagine instead a giant noose hanging above us. Imagine regularly imitating the action of guillotine during worship. Imagine coming in to speak to your priest, and finding a collection of decorated electric chairs above their desk.

It's disturbing, terrifying.

Something happened on this day.

What happened on this day transformed a symbol of agony into a symbol of healing. What happened today changed an image of shame into an image of redemption. Today a sign of cruelty became a sign of community. Because of today an emblem of death is an emblem of life.

For nearly two thousand years, we have tried to explain the radical transformation that happened on this day. Yet perhaps our attempts fall short precisely because on this day even God does not explain the unavoidable fear and sorrow that plague our lives.

On this day, God does not explain our suffering. On this day, God shares it.

Suffering is brought on by love, so what must it be to love the whole world? Love brings suffering because we cannot bear to see those we love hurt, we cannot bear when those we love cease loving us, we cannot bear the finality of their death. We learn to accept some of these things, but suffering is our primal cry of "no" to all the pain brought on by separation from all whom we love. Suffering is our refusal to accept the pain of love as integral to our fate.

The cross is *God's* refusal to accept this as our fate.

On the cross, we hear God's cry of "No." No to suffering, cruelty, pain, and hatred. No to isolation, estrangement, and brokenness. No to death.

It is the very fate of the cross that dies upon it. The death of existence separated from God and each other.

In this great No, we see God's ultimate Yes. Yes to life as we were created to live, fully in communion with God and each other. Yes to love from which we can never be separated. Yes to life that begins now and never ends.

On the cross, Jesus, incarnate God whose very Being is communion, cries out in the words of the psalmist, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" As Henri Nouwen says, "When Jesus spoke these words on the cross, total aloneness and full acceptance touched each other. In that moment of complete emptiness all was fulfilled. In that hour of darkness new light was seen. While death was witnessed, life was affirmed. Where God's absence was most loudly expressed, his presence was most profoundly revealed. When God himself in his humanity became part of our most painful experience of God's absence, he became most present to us."

From the cross, Jesus tells an unrelated woman and man that they are mother and son. Family, the most basic understanding we have of human relationship, is the original place we feel known and loved. Yet because our broken way of gathering ultimately separates us, family as we have known it can also make us feel most alone – not only by being left out but also within, gripped by the suffocating loneliness of feeling unknown by those closest to us.

On the cross, the Son is forsaken by the Father. And on the cross, he makes us mothers and sons, brothers and sisters, the family of God.

The transformation that happened in us and among us and throughout our world on this day is as stark as the difference between our heart and gut-wrenching reactions to other execution devices and the hope found in the cross to which we cling.

The very cross which could represent so much suffering, cruelty, and loneliness became the very symbol that whatever fear and sorrow we could possibly feel, God must have felt more to freely choose to take this on. In the cross, we are given the assurance that there is no road so long, no way so hard, and no place so dark that God will not go to wrap us in the reach of this saving embrace.

What happened on this day is that love has conquered this cross, and the sign of our fate of ultimate loneliness has become the sign of ultimate love.

On Good Friday, we know there is more to come, and that this end is only a beginning. Yet we stop, sit, and wait in this place today because the Fridays of our soul do not match the liturgical year, but what happened today makes those darkest nights good.

What happened today is not the flood of Easter light, but rather the salvation found in that first glimmer in the deepest darkness when we suddenly know that all is not lost.

So today we gaze upon the cross. We gather under it and make it with our hands as a prayer and a blessing. We taste the body broken and blood shed for us, and take this reality into our very bodies.

What happened today is not something we can explain. It is something we share.

Let us share it with the world.

What happened today transformed the cross, and it is transforming our lives, transforming our world. It is something we must share, as our prayer today says, "Let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen."