

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

April 2, 2010

Rev. Roger Rapp

Good Friday

Theme: The Irony of the Cross

Luke 23: 34

Once, in a sermon a number of years ago, I heard a pastor speak of his thoughts that he had as a child when he thought of Jesus dying on the cross. He sometimes wondered why Jesus didn't jump off the cross and terrify his tormentors and chase them away.

That illustration of Jesus jumping off of the cross came back to me this week as I discovered a meditation on Good Friday, written by Dr. Jennifer Hockenberry, who teaches philosophy at Mt. Mary College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Dr. Hockenberry's meditation is called "Nietzsche at the Foot of the Cross." 1

A brief background on Friedrich Nietzsche: He was born in 1844, the son of a Lutheran pastor near Leipzig, Germany. His father died when he was 5 years old. His writings are known for their critical view of Christianity. He died of insanity just before his 56<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1900. He is known for his announcement of the death of God and wrote a book specifically against Christians called "The Anti-Christ".

However, there is an old joke in some Christian circles that says Nietzsche was right only one night a year. That night is Good Friday, when we contemplate the anguish, suffering, and death of Jesus, as we have just heard in Scripture and song. In fact, the music of the African American spiritual, "Were You There" captures not only the suffering of Christ on our behalf, but also how terrifying it is to imagine our God being humiliated, beaten, and destroyed before those who loved him. It was all the more excruciating to have the love that they had experienced in the life of Jesus mocked, ridiculed, and destroyed right before their eyes.

So why bring up Friedrich Nietzsche on Good Friday? He was certainly not fond of Christians, and his writings attack much of Christian history and teaching. But, as Dr. Hockenbery indicates, "in the middle of his attacks of the church and churchgoers, Nietzsche changes course for a moment and says that while he dislikes Christians....he admires Jesus. He says that Good Friday is about love. He knows that traditional Christian views on atonement speak of how Christ died for our sins. Nietzsche sees atonement beliefs as rooted in an unhealthy view of punishment which Jesus did not share." Nietzsche believes that it is in our human nature to punish and destroy those who are evil, that those who cause suffering, sooner or later, will get what they deserve. We resonate with Russian president Putin in the aftermath of the suicide bombings in Moscow, when he says "We will destroy the terrorists." After all, most of us "moral" folks revel in the destruction of evil. On a smaller scale, when our integrity is violated, or when we are betrayed or attacked, our words are often, "I don't get mad, I get even." Which of course, means we are cherishing and relishing our anger.

What was remarkable for Nietzsche is how Jesus died without vengeance, without hate. In fact, in Luke 23, vs. 34, these words from the cross come from Jesus:

*“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”*

Similar words come from St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, who was stoned to death for his faith in Jesus. Again it is Luke, the author of the book of Acts who records Stephen’s words, even while the stones were raining upon him, his last words were, in a loud voice...not the voice of vengeance, or anger....which would be understandable. But, Luke records these words from St. Stephen: Acts Chapter 7, verse 60..

*“Lord, do not hold this sin against them”*

What an irony! Nietzsche, the severe critic of Christianity, reminding us of the true witness of Jesus.

Now, I must tell you that I do believe that there is truth in our belief that Jesus did in fact die for our sins. That in his body, all of the injustice and sinfulness of the world is carried by our God who took it all on in the death of his most precious son. But we can also be reminded tonight, on this night of darkness and hopelessness, the “wrongful death” of Jesus, to use the language of lawyers, can be a reminder of how Jesus modeled for us true love....echoed later in St. Stephen, that we are called not to return evil for evil, and that at the end of the day, the death of Jesus is embodied in the “little deaths” that all of us face on this side of eternity.

Ultimately, in the death of Jesus, we have a model for that very important petition in the prayer our Lord taught us. We don’t usually have much of a problem with “Forgive us our debts.” We know ourselves well enough to know that is all we can say. But what about the next

petition, “as we forgive our debtors.” For in Christ, all things are finally restored and renewed. This is what finally transcends our sometimes relentless desire for revenge, and our pathetic human efforts to justify ourselves.

So, tonight, we stand at the cross, watching our Lord die with love in his heart, even to the end. We are humbled and terrified by this power...and in the depths of our souls...know that God is present, in death, and in life.

Amen...and Amen.

1. Jennifer Hockenbery “Nietzsche at the Foot of the Cross: A Meditation on Good Friday” Currents in Theology and Mission, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, April 2004