

“Conscious Suffering: The Symbol of the Cross”
Good Friday Service of Meditation
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Friday, April 6, 2007, 12:00-12:45 p. m.
Bruce A. Bode

Invocation & Welcome

And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it.

(Gospel of Matthew: 27:33-34)

You have come at this noon-hour to a Good Friday Service of Meditation, a service intended to provide an opportunity for you to drop down, to let the weight of the burdens you so faithfully carry, carry you now into the depths.

Our service is held in the middle of the day, at the peak of light, in the bright of the sunshine, and in the midst of our active, busy lives. This is appropriate, not only because it follows tradition, but also because sorrow and suffering can come at midday as well as at midnight. Anxiety, fear, tragedy, and death know no special time.

Our service draws primarily on Christian traditions, but is intended to be universal and archetypal ... so that this story from nearly 2000 years ago of the suffering and death, the passion and crucifixion of Jeshua ben Joseph, Jesus son of Joseph, is not a story of an historical individual but rather a story that has become symbol and myth, that is, a container or vessel for human suffering and sorrow in general.

I will now read selected portions of this story taken from the four biblical Gospels, the intent being to bring to your mind the entire story of Good Friday – “God’s Friday” is the origin of that term.

First Scripture Reading

1. The Conspiracy Against Jesus (Mark 14:1-2 & Mark 14:10-11)

It was two days before the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him, for they said, “Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people....”

Then Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him. When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give Judas money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray Jesus.

2. The Treachery of Judas Foretold (Matthew 26:20-25)

When it was evening, Jesus took his place with the twelve; and while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." And the disciples became greatly distressed and began to say one after the other, "Surely not I, Lord?"

Jesus answered, "One who has dipped his hand into this bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born."

Judas, the one who was to betray him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" Jesus replied, "You have said so."

3. The Institution of the Eucharist (Mark 14:22-25)

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and, after blessing it, he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks, he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood, which is poured out for many."

4. Peter's Denial Foretold (Mark 14:26-31)

When they had sung the hymn, Jesus and the disciples went out to the Mount of Olives. And Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away..."

Peter said, "Even if all fall away, I will not." Jesus said to him, "Peter, I tell you truly, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times."

But Peter protested vehemently, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." And all of them said the same.

5. Jesus' Sorrow in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-36)

They came to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." Then Jesus took Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even unto death. Remain here and watch."

And going a little further he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, this hour might pass from him. He said, "Abba, [Father], all things are possible to Thee; take this cup from me. Nevertheless, not what I will, but thy will be done."

6. The Sleeping Disciples (Mark 14:36-42)

Then Jesus came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake even one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

And again Jesus went away and prayed, saying the same words. And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to answer him.

And Jesus came yet a third time, and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough; the hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand."

7. The Arrest of Jesus (Matthew 26:47-50)

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

At once Judas came up to Jesus and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him. Jesus said to Judas, "Friend, do what you are here to do."

8. The Denials of Peter (Luke 22:54-62)

Then they seized Jesus and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. And Peter was following at a distance. And when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down among them. A servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, "This man was also with him." But Peter denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him."

A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!"

Then about an hour later still another insisted, "Surely this man also was with him; why, by his accent, he is a Galilean." But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!"

At that moment, even while Peter was still speaking, the cock crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." And Peter went out and wept bitterly.

Hymn #265 "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded" (remain seated)

Second Scripture Reading:

We continue our reading of the Passion Story with excerpts from the four biblical Gospels:

9. Jesus Before Pilate (Mark 15:1-5)

As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate.

Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "You have said so."

Then the chief priests accused Jesus of many things. So Pilate asked him again, "Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you." But, to Pilate's astonishment, Jesus made no further reply.

10. The death of Judas (Matthew 27:3-4)

When Judas, the betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was overcome with remorse, and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders. He said, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood."

But they said, "What is that to us? That is your concern."

Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, Judas departed; and he went and hanged himself....

11. The Release of Barabbas (Matthew 27:15-24)

Now at Passover the Roman governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. So after the people had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" For Pilate realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed Jesus over for arrest.

While Pilate was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man; for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him."

Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. Pilate again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" And they said, "Let him be crucified!" "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, and that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood...."

12. Jesus Crowned with Thorns (Matthew 27:27-31)

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They placed a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, king of the Jews!" They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes back on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

13. The Crucifixion of Jesus (Matthew 27:32-38,44)

As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled Simon to carry Jesus' cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it.

When they had crucified Jesus, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down and kept watch over him.

Over his head they put the charge against him, which read: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."

Two bandits were crucified with Jesus, one on his right and one on his left.... and even these bandits taunted him....

14. Jesus and his Mother (John 19:25-27)

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, Mary, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

15. The Death of Jesus (Matthew 27:45-54)

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until mid-afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthanai?*" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "He is calling for Elijah." So one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But others said, "Wait, let us see if Elijah will come to save him." Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.

At that moment the curtain of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom, and the earth shook and rocks were split and tombs were opened.

Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus,

felt the earthquake and saw what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly, this man was a son of God."

Prayer & Period of Silence

Power of all being, both light and dark; encompassing, embracing, intermingling light and dark: today we would let the dark be dark, sorrow be sorrow, pain be pain, confusion be confusion, fatigue be fatigue, futility be futility, and suffering be suffering.

No attempt today to inject light into dark or to bring joy out of sorrow, to administer balm to pain, or bring clarity from confusion. No bright optimism, no silver lining, no effort to keep ourselves from falling.

Today we allow ourselves to walk in the valley. We linger under the shadow of death and acquaint ourselves with grief. We admit how our spirits thirst. With the poet we cry:

I'm slipping, I'm slipping away
like sand, like sand

slipping through fingers. All
my cells

are open and all
are thirsty, I ache and swell

in a hundred places, but mostly
in the middle of my heart.

(Ranier Maria Rilke, Rilke's Book of Hours, p. 69)

Contemporary Reading

My contemporary reading today is from Whidbey Island poet, David Whyte. The poem is titled, "The Faces at Braga," Braga being a village in Nepal in the Himalaya Mountains at about the 11,500 foot level.

In Braga is a 900 year-old temple with multiple carved wooden figures in it – Buddhas, no doubt. Above the entrance to the temple is a fierce figure that warns you, that calls you to pay attention, as if to say, "Don't enter this temple of life casually or expecting and demanding comfort."

The Faces at Braga

In monastery darkness
by the light of one flashlight
the old shrine room waits in silence

While above the door
we see the terrible figure,
fierce eyes demanding, "Will you step through?"

And the old monk leads us,
bent back nudging blackness
prayer beads in the hand that beckons.

We light the butter lamps
and bow, eyes blinking in the
pungent smoke, look up without a word,

see faces in meditation,
a hundred faces carved above,
eye lines wrinkled in the hand-held light.

Such love in solid wood!
Taken from the hillsides and carved in silence
they have the vibrant stillness of those who made them.

Engulfed by the past
they have been neglected, but through
smoke and darkness they are like the flowers

we have seen growing
through the dust of eroded slopes,
then slowly opening faces turned toward the mountain.

Carved in devotion
their eyes have softened through age
and their mouths curve through delight of the carvers hand.

If only our own faces
would allow the invisible carver's hand
to bring the deep grain of love to the surface.

If only we knew
as the carver knew, how the flaws
in the wood led his searching chisel to the very core,

we would smile, too
and not need faces immobilized
by fear and the weight of things undone.

When we fight with our failing
we ignore the entrance to the shrine itself
and wrestle with the guardian, fierce figure on the side of good.

And as we fight
our eyes are hooded with grief
and our mouths are dry with pain.

If only we could give ourselves
to the blows of the carvers hands,
the lines in our faces would be the trace lines of rivers

feeding the sea
where voices meet, praising the features
of the mountain and the cloud and the sky.

Our faces would fall away
until we, growing younger toward death
every day, would gather all our flaws in celebration

to merge with them perfectly,
impossibly, wedded to our essence,
full of silence from the carver's hands.

(David Whyte, "The Faces at Braga," Where Many Rivers Meet)

"CONSCIOUS SUFFERING: THE SYMBOL OF THE CROSS"

Introduction

For the past six Sundays of this Lenten season, a time of introspection and interior house-cleaning, I have been exploring some of the ideas of author and Jungian psychologist, Robert A. Johnson. Today, in this Good Friday service of meditation, I will briefly look at some of his ideas related to suffering – conscious suffering.

Suffering as natural

Suffering is a natural part of life. All creatures are subject to the possibility of suffering physical pain. Hardly is there anything that touches us more deeply than to hear an animal scream out in pain. All life on this earth groans under the weight of this reality.

But for us human creatures, physical suffering is compounded by mental suffering. Such mental suffering occurs because of ties of connection and love being broken, or because of plans, beliefs, expectations, and hopes being dashed.

Thus, mental suffering is also "natural." That is to say, given our capacity to form ties of love, as well as our capacity to form plans in the present and dreams for the future –

given all of this, how could there not be mental suffering when those bonds of connection and affection are torn, or our hopes and dreams broken? It would be “unnatural” to deny the pain and suffering that comes at such times.

Listen to Russian poet, Anna Ahkmatova, give way to her anguish upon the realization that her loved one will not be returning to her:

I did not close the door.
I did not light the candle.
I could not bring myself to lie down.
You don't know how tired I was.

And to think that everything's ruined,
That we suffer like the damned in hell.
Oh, I was certain that you would come back.

Such mental and spiritual suffering, I submit, cannot be avoided – should not be avoided. This, too, is part of nature – part of our nature.

Therefore, I believe in giving the ego its due, its rights – allowing it, encouraging it, to take in and express its anguish, anger, and grief when ties of love are snapped and bonds of affection broken. The Rev. A. Powell Davies has written:

When sorrow comes, let us accept it simply, as a part of life. Let the heart be open to pain; let it be stretched by it. All the evidence we have says that this is the better way.

Thus, mental suffering is a necessary and natural part of our human heritage, part and parcel with the evolution and development of consciousness and awareness.

Unnecessary suffering

But there is an unnecessary mental suffering as well, a suffering that leads nowhere, a neurotic suffering. This is the kind of suffering that would turn away from grief and deny that suffering and sorrow should be part of our reality.

It is as if out of the urge for a more perfect and beautiful world, we deny the reality that *is* our world. But it is this denial itself, ironically and tragically, that tears us apart and brings unnecessary and neurotic suffering.

Suffering as rejecting reality

Here is where the ideas of Robert Johnson may be helpful.

For Johnson, “God” is reality – all of reality, both what you like and regard as positive, and what you dislike and regard as negative. “God” is “what is.” To turn away from

anything “that is” is to turn away from “God.”

In his book, Contentment, he speaks of a situation in which an individual referred to a positive experience he had as a proof for him that God “exists.” However, it was pointed out to this person that his faith in God was rather thin if he could only find the divine in experiences he liked. This was something the person had a hard time hearing – as perhaps we all do. (Contentment, p. 68)

If you stumble on the word “God” in the above example, please find other language that works for you, but the point is: Whatever part of reality you refuse to embrace will not go away. It will still carry energy, for “what is” cannot not be.

Thus, that part of reality which is not embraced, which is pushed away and refused entrance into your world-view, will work from underneath, drain your vitality, and bring about mental, spiritual, and psychological suffering – horrific, neurotic suffering.

This suffering is caused by the refusal of the ego to open, the insistence of the “I” that it will have its way, the demand that reality conform to its desires, plans, goals, wishes, and dreams.

Opening up

On the other hand, if you are willing to make a little opening in your ego, if you are willing to put out a small flag of surrender at your entrenched position, if you are willing to suffer a little stretching of your current construction of things; then the larger reality which you have been denying and fighting will embrace and carry you and you will be released from that part of your mental anguish and suffering.

No one, for example, wants to die. The ego does not want to die. Yet, death is a stubborn fact of our reality. To deny it, to refuse to face it, is to bring about unnecessary and neurotic suffering, suffering that may rob one of any joy or vitality in life, suffering that may make one’s existence such a misery that, ironically, one may even end up taking one’s own life out of despair.

Thus, it is necessary to move toward death and to those parts of reality that one would rather not have to deal with. This is difficult work – the most difficult. It is what we may call “conscious suffering” or “creative suffering” as opposed to “unconscious suffering” or “neurotic suffering.”

The symbol of the cross

A symbol of such conscious or creative suffering is the Christ on the cross.

And now I must ask you to try to think symbolically, mythologically, metaphorically, and psychologically, or what I will say will not make sense. Thus, in speaking of the Christ on the cross, I am not speaking about an historical person, even though the symbol of the

cross arose out of an historical situation.

The image of the cross that makes the most sense to Robert Johnson is the Greek cross, not the Roman cross. The Greek cross has horizontal and vertical arms that are equal in length, and thus for him the cross is balanced.

The Roman cross, the one we typically see in the Western world, has a shorter horizontal arm that is placed well above the center of the longer, vertical arm. The horizontal arm is sometimes almost at the very top of the vertical arm, which, in Johnson's thinking, is a cross way out of balance, indicating a culture out of balance.

Further, in approaching the cross symbolically, one has to understand that the image of the Christ-figure on that cross is *you!* You are on that cross – right at the very center where the horizontal and vertical arms meet.

That figure on that cross, says Johnson, is paradoxically both fully human and fully divine. The Christian church over the centuries, and against all canons of rationality, insisted that this was the case, insisted that the Christ was fully human and simultaneously fully divine. Anything else was declared heresy.

Taken literally and historically, this is an absurdity. But taken psychologically and symbolically, says Robert Johnson, it makes a great deal sense ... because this has to do with the dynamics of the psyche, the structure and movement of our interior being.

(What the Christian church has done is to impose the needs and dynamics of the psyche upon history – to make art, to make images, to make myth and story for our interior being out of elements of exterior history.)

Thus, psychologically speaking, in our interior selves we human creatures are fully human and fully divine; fully matter and fully psyche; fully of the earth and fully of the imagination; fully related to space and time and fully related to that which is eternal (that is, beyond the grid of space and time).

The meaning of the cross

So what does it mean to be on the cross, to be transfixed at the center where the horizontal and vertical arms meet – a “double pair of opposites,” as Johnson says?

It means to be stretched out between the conflicts of earth and to be stretched out between the earth and the heavens. The horizontal arm represents the opposing conflicts of one's earthly life; the vertical arm represents the pull between being of the earth and of the imagination.

The task of being on the cross

And how does the myth indicate we should work with this situation? In other words,

what is the task of the one on the cross?

The task is to receive and suffer these pairs of opposites in the full weight of consciousness. Not to fall asleep. Not to try to escape. This is expressed in the myth in these words:

And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it.

(Gospel of Matthew: 27:33-34)

In other words, the Christ refuses to turn away from the tension of the forces pulling at him. He will remain conscious and awake.

But how can one bear it?

Often we can't. Perhaps more often than not, we cannot take it. We falter. We fail. There is no breakthrough. We remain stuck, stuck at the crossroads, stuck on the cross, desperately caught in the prison of our present consciousness. And we suffer for it – horrific suffering. Nothing makes sense. We bear the pangs of hell – “My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?”

Holding the tension

But Johnson's idea is that with any pair of conflicts that one suffers, if one can hold on and not flee but rather carry the tension, a solution from beyond the pairs of opposites will present itself – a solution from a deeper, underlying unity of life and being.

Such a solution will come as a grace from beyond the conscious will – a creative solution outside the conscious understanding.

Yet, the will does its part by holding the tension and willingly sacrificing its present position, its current consciousness. As the German poet Rilke says:

Into the great hands of your heart, O God, I place the fragments of my life.
Spend them however you will.

A concluding idea

And, then, one final idea on “conscious suffering” from Johnson – and I don't know whether you will find this comforting or discomfoting – but it's the idea that the conscious suffering we undergo in our life is not something strictly personal, not something related just to our personal being.

For Johnson, the suffering that we do is more than personal suffering. Our suffering is also on behalf of the larger reality of life and being that is seeking awareness in and

through us.

God or Reality – as I say, they are one for Johnson – is seeking greater awareness and consciousness of itself, and we are instruments of that process. We are part of the growing consciousness of God or Reality. We are “eyes and ears of the cosmos.”

Thus, the conflicts and tensions we experience in life aren't only of our own making. These are evolutionary forces pushing at us, driving us. We struggle and suffer on behalf of powers larger than ourselves.

Says Johnson, we tend to take too much responsibility for our suffering upon ourselves – as if we have personally created and caused all the tensions and conflicts with which we struggle.

Not so, he says. We didn't personally create this cosmos; we simply find ourselves in it. Thus, the conflicts we experience are the clashing and collisions of powers greater than ourselves that are evolving, experimenting, playing themselves out. And this is part of the cross we bear.

Thus, our task, in cosmic perspective, is to be willing to carry our cross on behalf of larger life, to give our selves over to the ongoing task of greater consciousness. Or, as the crucifixion myth puts it:

And Jesus, on the evening before his death ... came to a place called Gethsemane. And he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” Then Jesus took Peter and James and John with him. And a sudden fear came over him, and great distress. And he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even unto death. Remain here and watch.”

And going a little further he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, this hour might pass from him. “Father,” he said, “all things are possible to Thee; take this cup from me. Nevertheless, not what I will, but thy will be done.”

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the Good Friday service given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on April 6, 2007. The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)