
Converted by the Cross of Love

A sermon by the Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton
Good Friday, 12:00 p.m.
John 18:1-19:42

It was Good Friday of 2008. Then verger, Patrick Edwards and I had just finished an all night prayer vigil in Mikell Chapel which culminated in the Good Friday liturgy. Now we were on our way to Emory Hospital, still in our black cassocks, to bring these prayers to a friend. Our friend was the Rev. Bill Payton, and he has formed my understanding of priesthood in untold ways. But far more importantly, he showed me the way of the cross, to be a way of love.

Bill had hoped to officiate the liturgy himself that morning, and was so very disappointed that he was once again in the hospital. That in itself made an impression. The service he most wanted to officiate in the midst of his battle with cancer was today's liturgy. And as we read these prayers around his hospital bed, it was then I heard the words in a new way. I heard them as words of love, and conversion.

We come today for many reasons. It is an optional service to many, a keystone in the triduum for others. The most common question at the heart of the mystery for us is how can this day, the day of Jesus' death, be Good? How can it be for us something other than a way station between the last supper and the joy we know will come at the dawn of Sunday morning?

I think Nicodemus has a story for us today. It is a story of conversion by the cross. Not out of guilt or fear, but through love and gratitude.

We have journeyed with Nicodemus through Lent. We saw him a few weeks ago coming to Jesus in the night to explore just who this Jesus might be. He was a wealthy and prominent Jew, but there was something about Jesus that caused him to look a bit deeper. But in the midst of a conversation about conversion through new birth, he was not able to declare belief. Not yet.

But he was willing to ask an important question on the road to faith. He came away with a question, often our question. A Good Friday question, "How can these things be?"

Later, Nicodemus has clearly continued to ponder his time in the night when he engages his own colleagues. The Pharisees are using scripture to justify their questioning of the temple police. They demand to know why Jesus has not been arrested.

And Nicodemus again asks a question. This is a question about the intersection of faith and righteousness. "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing, does it?" Another step in the journey of faith. Our question, a Good Friday question. "How can these things be?"

And then we arrive at the day of Jesus' death.

I wonder whether Nicodemus was in the crowd at the crucifixion? Was this the moment he moved more clearly from the ambiguity of darkness into the clarity of the light? While of course I don't know, I like to believe he was there. Or that at the

least someone told him of Jesus' last words.

"It is finished."

These words of Jesus in the gospel of John are not words of anguish or betrayal. They are words of assent and completion. The Johannine account shows us a savior willing to go to the very end in the name of love. Further than we could possibly imagine. Something that when we contemplate it in the dark can only leave us with the question, "How can these things be?"

Nicodemus had heard the answer in the before. In the night Jesus had said to him. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

But until we hear, "it is finished" in the light of day, we cannot begin to imagine that kind of love. The kind of love that sees dying as an offering. A gift.

I wonder when Nicodemus began to understand that?

I began to understand that through Bill Payton. As he neared his own death, he showed us all how to die. He gave the gift of his presence to us throughout his illness and knew that death was the very completion of his earthly life.

He called me, near those final days to come to the house. Sitting amidst his tax preparations, he also wanted to let me know his wishes for the funeral. I will never forget the slight smirk on his face before he commenced to tell me his wishes. He said, "I have a few ideas. And it will not be without its excesses." He wanted to give all of us the most full expression of his life through the funeral and the all night vigil in Mikell Chapel with his body. The same place we had kept vigil with Christ on the journey from Holy Thursday to Good Friday.

But Bill must have also known something about Nicodemus. Do you remember the burial? The man who had been skulking around in the dark, asking pointed intellectual questions has been broken open. This same man arrives with Joseph of Arimathea to prepare Jesus body for burial, loaded down with almost a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes. To give him the burial of a King, in the fullness of daylight, when anyone could see him. He knows nothing of resurrection, but has gained courage and conversion from witnessing to love. And his response can be nothing else but come and honor that gift.

One of the last gifts of love Bill gave to me, and his colleagues on staff here, Bill Harkins, Todd Smelser, and Dan Murphy was an invitation. In that meeting to plan his last wishes he told me of a time he was asked to prepare another colleagues body for burial. He said, "this was one of the most meaningful experiences of my life, and I want to offer it to you."

So after Bill died, we went to the funeral home and dressed him for the last time in his priestly garb. Psalms were read as we put on his favorite Easter clerical shirt. It was blue plaid. Then the alb. The stole. And finally the chasuble. As words of the psalms washed over us, I realized what a loving invitation this had been. To be with one we loved after his death could only be a deeper invitation to faith and conversion. Bill had struggled with the cross of his cancer and made it a gift of love. And we were all converted to a deeper faith as a result.

Good Friday has never been the same for me.

Amen