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## *Where is the Glory in this Cross?*

**A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa**  
**Good Friday – Year C**

There's a lot of talk in Christian preaching, hymnody, and prayer about the glory of the cross and the joy with which Christ faced it. I suppose this helps to soften and make sense of the scandal of the cross—and to justify God, and ourselves, in the face of it. But on this Good Friday, I cannot reconcile this rosy view—or all this glory--with what we just saw. I just can't believe that this was God's will.

What we just saw was the betrayal, arrest, trial, abandonment and denial, humiliation and abuse, condemnation, crucifixion, and death of an innocent man who was also God, and who had come to love us and be with us, no matter what. The cross we just saw was an instrument of shameful death, as one of this week's collects says—a means of execution, demanded by humanity, not by God.

This is something that John's Gospel makes painfully clear: it was humans who crucified Christ, both by what they have done, and by what they have left undone. Just look at all the different ways that all these different people participate in the Passion of Christ.

The chief priests and Pharisees are hunting Jesus, because they resent his influence and reject his teachings. Judas betrays him and Peter denies him. Police arrest him with torches and weapons. One high priest, Annas, questions Jesus and binds him, then sends him off to another, Caiaphas, who passes him off to Pilate, who tries to pass him back to the people, so that they can judge him themselves. But they want Pilate to do their dirty work for them, and so they pass the buck back. Soldiers beat him and mock him, telling themselves all the while that they're just following orders. The crowd calls out, "Crucify him!" No one, in John's Gospel, helps Jesus carry his cross.

When so many are guilty to some degree, none, it seems, is responsible.

Oddly enough, Jesus, who is truly innocent, is the only one who's willing to suffer the consequences of all this sin and violence—and to accept responsibility for others. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, Jesus refuses to stand apart as the only guiltless one, watching the rest of humanity go to ruin under the weight of its guilt. [\[1\]](#) Jesus refuses to run or hide, but answers plainly and directly: "I am he. I am the one you're looking for. Let these others go." He refuses to play the blame game.

But the rest of us do not give it up quite so easily. We'd rather cast about for someone or something to project our own dark side onto—someone else who's more guilty than we. Guilt does come in degrees, to be sure: we're not all equally guilty for everything. But we *are all* caught up in webs of violence and death, in our personal and corporate lives. And this focus on someone else's guilt can be a way of hiding from our own responsibility—our responsibility for the past and present, and our responsibility to the future and to others.

The cross holds a mirror up to us and our society and challenges us to see: to see who we really are, and what we're doing to one another, and how we continue to turn against Christ. It exposes our capacity for both good and evil, thus giving us freedom to choose. It shows us that Jesus was crucified by people like us, enslaved by sin and fear and stuck in a cycle of violence.

But it also shows us Christ's wide-open love for us and for this whole world, and it calls us, as Bonhoeffer says, to have

some share in Christ's large-heartedness, to act with responsibility and freedom even in the hour of danger, and to show a real sympathy that springs, not from fear, but from the liberating love of Christ for all who suffer. [\[ii\]](#)

But it can be hard for us to face the truth. Maybe because we're scared we can't handle the responsibility, or want an excuse to focus only on ourselves. Maybe because we're scared that our dark side will overwhelm us, or disqualify us from love and forgiveness. Maybe because we're still convinced that we have to justify ourselves—because we don't really trust in God's mercy.

And so, all too often, we either clean up the cross or find someone else to pin it on.

Historically, Jews have been the preferred scapegoat. The mysterious “they” of the Empire, and religious and political leaders, are also strong contenders. Then there's the individual scapegoat, Judas, Christianity's arch-villain, whose name has become shorthand for “traitor.”

Even God is not safe from our projections—at least, not according to a popular interpretation of Jesus' saving work: the penal substitutionary atonement theory. Yes, it's a mouthful. You may not know the term, but you probably know the theory, which goes something like this: humanity sinned against God and therefore owed a debt to God. But because God is divine, and humans are just, well, human, they could not pay the debt themselves. So God sent—or sacrificed—Jesus, God's only son, to suffer the punishment—to pay for us, with his life.

The theory has many variations, and there are many problems with it. It pits God against God, and justice against mercy. It limits God to a transactional, all-too-human understanding of justice. It implies that violence is the way out of violence, and it sanctions the scapegoat mechanism: the idea that, as Caiaphas says, it's better for one to die—or bear guilt—for the sake of the many. It glorifies suffering, in a way that can justify abuse and encourage a cult of martyrdom; and it depicts God in a way that contradicts the revelation of God in Christ and in Scripture.

In the Gospels, God does *not* demand Jesus' crucifixion; and Jesus does not seek it out, or suffer it joyfully. But he doesn't run away from it either. He accepts suffering and death as a consequence of the incarnation—of living and loving fully and of speaking the truth in a society that doesn't want to hear it. He accepts it in faith, knowing it cannot undo him and that he can redeem even this.

*That* is where the glory is: not in the cross by itself, but in Jesus, whose glory shines through even on the cross, as in his birth, teaching and ministry, resurrection and ascension. What is glorious is what Jesus does with the cross: he meets us there—in the middle of our deepest sorrow, sin, and death—and sanctifies and transforms it. What is glorious is that Jesus carries out the incarnation to its bitter end and beyond, so that no human being, and no aspect of human experience, falls beyond God's redemption. What is glorious is the new life that God brings out of the cross, and the mercy God shows on both those who are crucified, and those who do the crucifying.

Yes, God shows mercy on both the crucified and the crucifier—on both the innocent and the guilty. And that's why we can face the cross, too, and our participation in it and in the violence and injustices in our own time. That's why we can face—we can confess and repent from—the power we've given over to the powers of the world, and to our own fear, pride, greed, and anger.

We can face the cross and all that it says about us and our world, because it shows us also that God already loves us, and already has mercy on us, and is dying to free us from our sin and guilt.

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[\[i\]](#) Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (NY: Touchstone, 1995 [1949]), 237.

[\[ii\]](#) *Ibid.*, 13.