

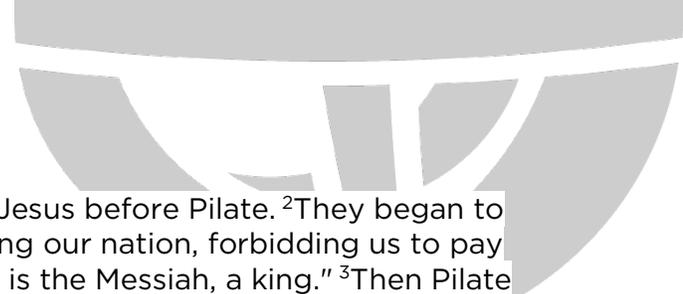


Good Friday
April 2, 2021

Making Room at the Cross
Pastor Shelley Cunningham

Luke 22:47-23:46 NRSV

⁴⁷While [Jesus] was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; ⁴⁸but Jesus said to him, "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?" ⁴⁹When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, "Lord, should we strike with the sword?" ⁵⁰Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. ⁵¹But Jesus said, "No more of this!" And he touched his ear and healed him. ⁵²Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, "Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? ⁵³When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!" ⁵⁴Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. ⁵⁵When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. ⁵⁶Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, "This man also was with him." ⁵⁷But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." ⁵⁸A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" ⁵⁹Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, "Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean." ⁶⁰But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. ⁶¹The Lord turned and looked at Peter. 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." ⁶²And he went out and wept bitterly. ⁶³Now the men who were holding Jesus began to mock him and beat him; ⁶⁴they also blindfolded him and kept asking him, "Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?" ⁶⁵They kept heaping many other insults on him. ⁶⁶When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, gathered together, and they brought him to their council. ⁶⁷They said, "If you are the Messiah, tell us." He replied, "If I tell you, you will not believe; ⁶⁸and if I question you, you will not answer. ⁶⁹But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God." ⁷⁰All of them asked, "Are you, then, the Son of God?" He said to them, "You say that I am." ⁷¹Then they said, "What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips!"



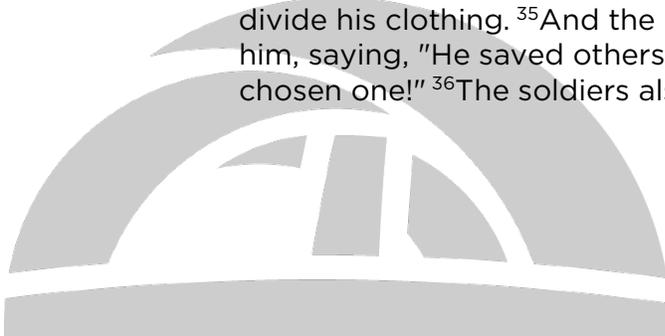
¹Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. ²They began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king." ³Then Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He answered, "You say so." ⁴Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no basis for an accusation against this man." ⁵But they were insistent and said, "He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place."

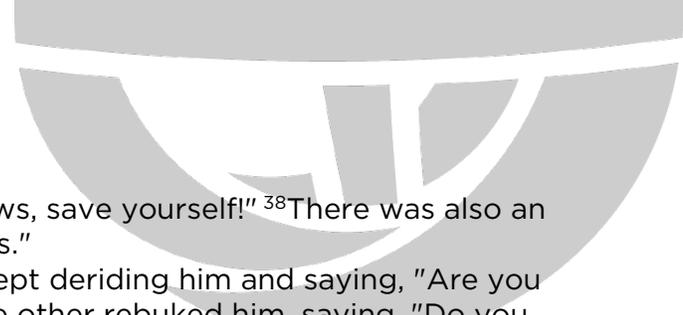
⁶When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. ⁷And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. ⁸When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. ⁹He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. ¹¹Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. ¹²That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies. ¹³Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, ¹⁴and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. ¹⁵Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. ¹⁶I will therefore have him flogged and release him."

¹⁸Then they all shouted out together, "Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!" ¹⁹(This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) ²⁰Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; ²¹but they kept shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!" ²²A third time he said to them, "Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him." ²³But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. ²⁴So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. ²⁵He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

²⁶As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. ²⁸But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' ³⁰Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.' ³¹For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

³²Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [[³⁴Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."]] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" ³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour





wine,³⁷ and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"⁴¹ And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong."⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."⁴³ He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

⁴⁴It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon,⁴⁵ while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two.⁴⁶ Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last.

For what is grief, if not love persevering?

When I heard this line – spoken in the penultimate episode of the spring's TV show WandaVision – it took my breath away.

Doesn't it speak to this past year?

How much grief have you carried? How much have we – as individuals and as a church and a community and as a country and as a world? We have read about it and wrestled with it and been shaped by it. We have mourned those who have died from COVID and at the hands of violence. We have cried in the face of injustice and recoiled from sorrow at just how awful and uncaring human beings can be to one another. As evening falls on the darkest night of the church year, grief is the thing we cannot escape.

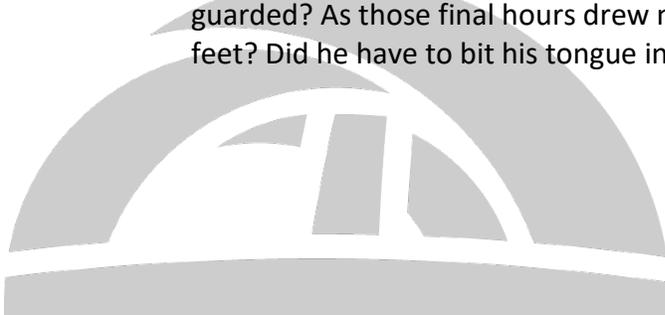
Yes, friends. We know grief. And as we hear the raw retelling of Jesus' final hours, of his betrayal by Judas and his denial by Peter and the calculated condemnation by both the religious leaders and the political powers, it feels almost too much to bear.

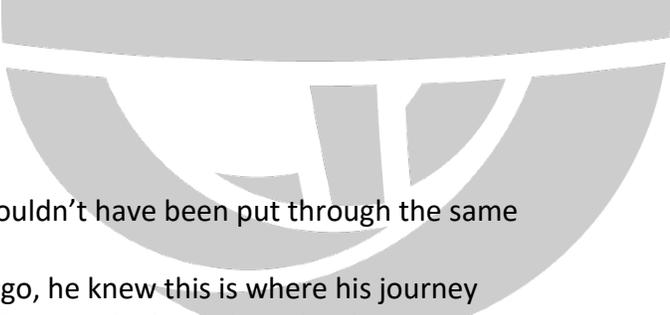
What is grief, if not love persevering?

Growing up, I always struggled with the old adage, "Tis better to have loved and lost, than to never have loved at all." You see, love is marvelous. But it hurts, too. It hurts when a marriage dissolves. When a friendship fades away. When people change. Sometimes the hurt goes away after awhile. But not always.

Wouldn't it just be easier to harden our hearts, to put up walls and numb our feelings rather than suffer the pain of rejection, or loneliness, or despair? Anything to protect ourselves from the grief of love, lost.

I wonder if that was one of the temptations Jesus wrestled with. As he started his ministry in the wilderness, was he tempted to keep the people at arm's length? To reveal only so much of his identity, his purpose? Along the way, might he have kept his secret a little quiet, or been more guarded? As those final hours drew near, did he have to dine with his friends, to sit and wash their feet? Did he have to bit his tongue in the face of his tormentors? It might not have lessened the





physical pain of crucifixion but at least his heart, his soul wouldn't have been put through the same kind of agony.

Yet when Jesus set his face to Jerusalem so many months ago, he knew this is where his journey would end. In a few hours of darkness, surrounded not by the ones he knew best, but by strangers. Feeling the pain of love, lost. And Jesus came to Jerusalem anyway.

What is grief, if not love persevering?

One of the integral elements of grief is memory. They might be happy memories: a blissful summer picnic with your beloved; a holiday meal with every chair around the table full; an inside joke shared with dear friends. Or they might be painful memories: a word said in anger; an unresolved misunderstanding; regret or guilt or second-guessing. But memories are our evidence of life lived, of what it means to being human. You might call the very act of remembering a form of testimony. Hold fast, then to what the second thief says to Jesus: *Remember me. Remember me when you come into your kingdom.* It's a very human desire not to be forgotten. Not to disappear into nothingness. I wonder if that thief knew, when he asked Jesus to remember him, that he came from a God who makes a habit of remembering. That's what God does, again and again. God remembers those in need. And God's remembering isn't a thought, it is an act. An act of salvation. And even on the cross, that saving act, that promise comes from Jesus, that he will not leave or forsake this man. He will remember him.

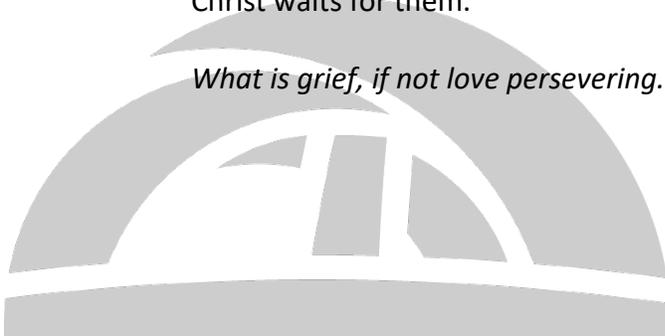
What is grief, if not love persevering?

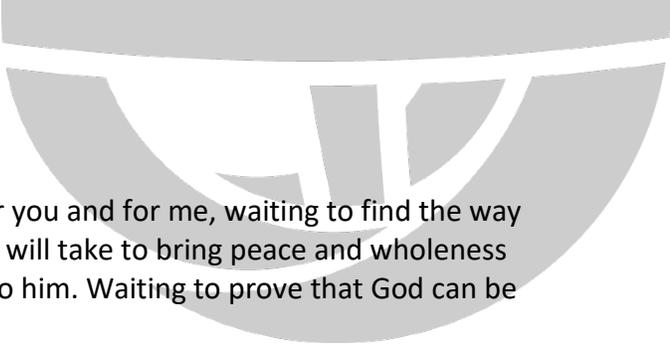
As Luke tells it, Jesus shares surprisingly few words in his final hours. But the ones he does share help us see that Jesus' heart – as it has been throughout this gospel – is a heart of love. The same Jesus who told parables of seeking out and saving every lost sheep and wayward son asks for forgiveness – forgiveness – for those who have ridiculed and condemned him. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Forgiveness that is at the heart of so much of Luke's gospel is love come to life on the lips of Jesus. The same Jesus who made a foreigner – a Samaritan – the hero of the story promised a common criminal that he would not be forgotten. “Truly, today you will be with me in paradise.” The same Jesus who taught his disciples to venture forth believing that they would be received in love turned to his own father as he breathed his last, trusting that God had not abandoned him even when all signs pointed otherwise. “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

What is grief, if not love persevering?

Perhaps what we learn from Jesus this day is that there is a different way to think of grief. We hope beyond hope that when we experience the darkest, emptiest, most frustrating, agonizing moments in our lives that somehow, somehow there is meaning. Somehow, somehow we are not alone. Somehow, somehow, God will carry us through and help us persevere. That's why theologian Jurgen Moltmann writes that, “at the point where men and women lose hope, where they become powerless and can do nothing more, the lonely, assailed, and forsaken Christ waits for them.”

What is grief, if not love persevering.





My friends, Christ is waiting. On that cross he is waiting, for you and for me, waiting to find the way that he can sacrifice with one more act of love, whatever it will take to bring peace and wholeness to this world. Waiting for us to remember that we belong to him. Waiting to prove that God can be trusted.

I do not know what grief you bring to the cross today. But I do know that you bring it to one who receives it, and holds it, and shares it. And that one loves without limits. In this cross we see that he makes room for all. And his love will persevere. Amen.

