

April 12, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

As we finish this Holy Week, we look forward to celebrating the Resurrection of our Lord. To prepare us to live as the new creation this Easter season, you are invited to---

- Read my message, "The Cross of Good Friday: From Darkness to Light".
- Google *Community UMC in Waterford Facebook* to view this Sunday's 9:30 Easter Sunday worship service.
- Read Pastor Bill's last sermon on our 40 Days of Community.
- See Community church's website to access Right Now Media Access for free Christian resources to read as we continue to spend more time at home.

I will attach another prayer list for the week of April 19. I hope to reach each one of you in the next week to wish you a blessed Easter. My prayer is for you to know the same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead lives in you! Alleluia!

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***"If the Spirit of the one who raised Christ from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies, through his Spirit living within you!" (Romans 8:11)***

May you meet Jesus, the Crucified One,  
who showed his love for you by suffering for on the cross of Golgotha.

May you meet the Resurrected Christ,  
who asks you, "Do you love me?"

May you respond, "Yes, Lord, I love you!"

May you know that the same spirit that raised Christ from the dead lives in you!

Go and live as Easter people!

Alleluia!

# THE CROSS OF GOOD FRIDAY – FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT

By Mary T. Crane

April 10, 2020

**In most churches, Good Friday services are usually poorly attended.**

But it is completely different on Easter Sunday. Churches are packed!

Americans are uncomfortable with Good Friday.

We want to skip this day and get right to the Easter Bunny and the jellybeans!

But we can't have Easter Sunday without Good Friday.

**We just listened to Peter's story of Holy Week, filled with overwhelming darkness.**

Lazarus' death, Jesus weeping, Mary and Martha's grief,

The religious leaders' jealousy and envy,

The disciples failing Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus sweating tears of blood,

Judas' kiss of betrayal, Peter's violent act and denial,

Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin's sham trial,

Pilate sacrificing the life of an innocent man for his political power,

Soldiers mocking & crucifying Jesus

*Holy Week sounds like a soap opera, except that it was real life.*

## **Darkness at the Tomb**

Is there anything darker for humans than death itself, being laid in a tomb, with no hope or future?

And where is the justice for all those who have been the victims of horrendous acts of evil in our world?

## **You and I cannot escape the darkness of this world.**

Hearing the daily count of coronavirus deaths is staggering and overwhelming. Sometimes we want to turn off the news and forget about all the suffering and death.

But covering our eyes cannot make death and sin magically disappear. The darkness that Peter witnessed during Holy Week continues today.

## **The darkness of our world also includes all the ways we human beings are at our worst.**

Like Peter, we would have denied Jesus three times.

We ARE like the disciples and Judas and Caiaphas and Pilate and the soldiers.

God has called us to love - to accept, appreciate, encourage and affirm others - to respect and treat every human person with dignity.

Instead we turn away from and turn against others. We fail to love.

*Sin is simply our failure to love God and others.*

*And sin is not just individually between me and God.*

## **Any institution or organization or social group can be filled with the spirit of darkness,**

whether corporations, businesses, schools, sports teams, churches, or governments.

**Let me share an example from my ESL class.** I have students from Myanmar who fled the ethnic cleansing that has been permitted by the government. Over 9,000 Rohingya were murdered in 2017. Over 43,000 parents are missing. One young father in my class cries when talking about these atrocities. His family has survived the overcrowded refugee camps that lack soap and water. Three years later over *half a million* refugees are still in those camps and are at high risk for the coronavirus. The Rohingya have nowhere to go, their country doesn't want them because they are the Muslim minority and are considered illegal immigrants, and other countries don't want them. *My students know well the spirit of darkness.*

**I could tell you about our country's criminal justice system that has failed some of our citizens,** like Walter McMillian whose story was told in the recent movie *Just Mercy*. He was falsely and unjustly sentenced to death in Alabama but was eventually cleared thanks to the work of Bryan Stevenson. *Walter knows well the spirit of darkness.*

**And there are corporations like Dupont that have polluted our waterways and produced products with chemicals that have been proven to give people cancer.** *These families know well the spirit of darkness.* [This true story was told in the movie, *Dark Waters.*]

We all have been the victims of sin and have participated in some way in wounding others.  
**All our hands are bloody, not just Pilate's.**  
**Together we have extinguished the light of Christ.**

**Where is there hope? Good Friday points us to - the Cross!**

**Now we have commercialized the cross** and made it into beautiful jewelry and decorations. But wearing a cross is really like wearing a gas chamber, an electric chair, or a guillotine.

**You see the cross in the Roman empire was a symbol of horrendous torture.** Not only did people suffer long, excruciating deaths, they were humiliated and shamed as they hung there naked, knowing their bodies would be consumed by vultures and thrown into garbage dumps. However, wealthy Joseph of Arithemea was given permission to arrange for Jesus' burial in the tomb.

**Perfect goodness, perfect love walked our earth.** Instead of receiving and appreciating Jesus, humans rejected him - with ferocious violence, and continue to reject him today.

**If Jesus died such a brutal death, it is because we human beings, created good in the very image of God, have spiraled down into the depths of darkness, individually and collectively.**

**Yes, our sins are that bad – that ugly, that horrible. A little self-improvement won't fix us. We need a Savior to deliver us and transform us.**

**When my grandson sleeps over, we have had to keep a nightlight on** because of his fear of the dark and of the ghosts in our closet. We really don't have any ghosts!

***Humans desperately need light to shine in the darkness of our lives and world.***

So how can the cross bring light and transform you and me and our world?

**1. In the cross, we can find comfort and hope.**

I remember expecting my first baby and miscarrying after a few months. I went through such despair that I started ripping up my bible. My husband gently asked me to leave the crucifixion story in it. God met me in my darkness as I was reminded that Jesus knew suffering and death, too, on the cross. He could understand my pain and sorrow. Jesus' light transformed my darkness.

God is with us and comforts us amid death and suffering. As followers of Jesus, we have hope now and for eternal life.

**2. In the cross, we find purpose in serving people, looking out for others, not just ourselves.**

In Matthew 25 Jesus tells the parable of the sheep and goats. Whenever we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned, we are doing it to Jesus. **We meet Jesus in those who suffer around us, like my students who were refugees in Myanmar.**

**3. In the cross, we see ourselves (and our sins) truthfully.**

Jesus' cross is God's judgment on the darkness of all our sins: our self-deception and self-righteousness and selfishness. [Story of the Pharisee and Tax Collector]

**Let's return to Peter.** When he saw Jesus' wounds and love for him as Jesus hung on the cross, Peter felt tremendous remorse and wept. He had faced the painful truth that he had denied and abandoned Jesus. There can be no salvation or healing without seeing ourselves accurately, as God sees us.

**4. In the cross, we receive God's love and forgiveness.**

When we turn toward the cross and see how Jesus suffered for us, we can receive God's love to heal our wounds, a love that is stronger than our fear and hatred and pride and selfishness.

**But we can't stop there.** The cross is not meant to condemn us, to just point out our sins. God declares or calls us his children AND wants to remove our defects.

**5. In the cross, we are transformed to have the power to live as new creation.**

**There was a time in my life when I was struggling terribly with forgiving some family members.** I was filled with such resentment and anger. I remember reading this bible verse - that the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead was in me. I continued to meditate on this bible verse, repeating it over and over and over... *The same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is in me!*

I kept asking God's Spirit to change my heart, to set me free from my bondage. I knew God's love cannot exist where there is hatred and indifference.

**God did do a miracle in my heart, helping me to see them with compassion.**

It is a miracle of grace that helps us forgive our enemies and those who hurt us.

You see, our human love will run out. When my husband and I got married, our friend sang this song at our wedding: "Our love filled with God's love is unending."

**Jesus continually turned to God in prayer so that he could respond with love.**

We cannot live as the new creation without the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is the gift of God's love that helps us persevere in loving others.

**Our theme for Lent has been on how God created us for loving relationships.**

**Jesus did not just come to save ME from MY sins. Jesus came to save US from OUR sins.**

**God wants to redeem all of creation.**

**Why? So, WE can have more loving relationships – in our marriages, families, churches, state, nation and world.**

**This virus has forced us to see how much we really need each other.** We have been missing why God put us here on earth. It's not to have the latest cell phone, or drive the nicest car, or have the biggest savings account.

**God's purpose is for us to share the good news of God's love – to glorify God by loving others!**

**It is only by turning to the cross on Good Friday that we can receive its gifts:**

The cross brings us God's comfort and hope, purpose for living, truth in seeing ourselves, love and forgiveness, and power.

**These gifts allow us to live in the light of God's perfect love - and not the darkness of death and sin.**

**As we receive Jesus, we receive the abundant life now and eternal life forever!**

**After the resurrection, Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?"** This was Peter's invitation to make things right with Jesus, to recommit to their relationship, to love Jesus back.

**Jesus is asking you now, "Do you love me?"**

Look at the cross and see Jesus's wounds. This is how much Jesus loves you.

Look at your wounds. Where are you hurting?

Look at the wounds of our world. Ask God to give you compassion for others.

As we pray, commit yourself to Jesus, love Jesus back.

**I invite you to pray this prayer with me:**

Jesus, I'm afraid of the darkness around me, all the suffering and death. And I see the ways I have spread darkness in my life. Forgive me for all my sins. I need you to be my Savior. Set me free from my sins. I can't change without your power. You created me to love and to help heal your world. Fill me with your perfect love that casts out darkness and despair. Thank you for dying for me on the cross, for loving me that much, and for giving me the hope of eternal life now and in the world to come. Amen.

## **LIVING A GENEROUS LIFE - 40 Days of Community**

### **By Pastor Bill**

For the past six weeks we've been in this series on 40 Days of Community. Looking to deepen the sense of community in our church family and reach out to the community around our church family. **What better time to learn to this, then during Lent**, a time that's like a 40 day trial run in letting God change your heart and shift your lifestyle to better align with God's will.

**The word for "community" in the Bible is the word "fellowship."** Fellowship is what we've been talking about for the last five weeks and in the original language of the bible – Greek - it is the word *koinonia*. *Koinonia* is an important word and is translated many different ways because, mainly because like a diamond, it has multiple facets to it. In the Bible, *koinonia* is translated as fellowship, but also community, or participation. *Koinonia* is translated as contribution and interestingly enough – it's also translated as generosity.

**All of these words are drawn from *koinonia* and are essential elements of fellowship.** My point - if we are going to have fellowship, there must be a sense of community and a participation in that community. You also need to make a contribution into my life and your own life. **And there must be generosity - you cannot have community without generosity.** Generous with our time and energy, our money and resources... generous with every part of our lives. So you really can't enjoy community without generosity.

**Let's listen today's scripture and listen for the theme of generosity Phil. 2:1-5**  
Did you hear about generosity and Koinonia? *"Not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."* **Look out for the interests of others – be generous!**

**So why does God want us to learn to be generous with each other?  
Here are incredible benefits to being generous with others.**

#### **1. Generosity creates community - *Koinonia*.**

2 Corinthians 9:11-12 (NIV) tells us, *"You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous... not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God."* When we're generous with each other, it produces prayers of thank God for each other and we're drawn closer to each other.

The Bible says this, Matthew 6 *"Your heart will be wherever your treasure is."* In other words, wherever I put my time, my money, my effort, my energy, wherever I invest myself that's what's going to attract me. My money tends to be a magnet. In other words, if you want to get a heart for Microsoft, buy some stock. The moment you buy some stock in something - you become very interested in that company.

Wherever you put your time and money, that's where your heart is - that's what Jesus said. **For many, your heart is in your home** - you put your time, money and energy – fixing it up.

**Maybe your heart may be in your work** - that's where you put your time, money and energy.  
**Or it maybe it's a hobby** - where you put your time, your money and your energy.

**Wherever your treasure is your heart's going to be there.**

So... when I'm generous with you or with the poor, when I'm generous with God or anybody – that's where my heart tends to go. When I give to God, my heart is drawn closer to God and every time I give to you it draws my heart closer to you. ***Generosity creates community.***

The early Christians were famous for their generosity. Acts 4 tells us “*The community of believers... shared everything in common.*” They were a family and shared generously. ***Because God is generous and wants us to become like Him - generosity creates community.***

## **2. Generosity strengthens my faith.**

2 Corinthians 9:13 “*Your giving proves the reality of your faith.*” Of the 3000 plus promises in the Bible – there are more promises about giving than anything else. In fact, God talks more about giving than heaven or hell. Why? God wants us to become like Him.

Do you know that you would have nothing in your life, if it weren't for the generosity of God. We wouldn't be able to breathe if not for the generosity of God. So God says “I want you to be more like Me!” I'm generous with you and want you to be generous with others.

There's a principle in 2 Corinthians 9 that's worth paying attention to - it says “*Whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.*” You know this principle because it's true in every area of life.

- If you're critical of other people, they're going to be critical of you.
- If you gossip about other people, people will gossip about you.

**Whatever you give out – you are going to get back.**

- If you're encouraging and sow affirmation, people will be affirming to you.
- If you are loving to others, people are going to sow love back to you.

**Whatever you give out in life, you're going to get back. God wired the universe that way.**

Sooner or later I have to ask myself, will I trust God's promises where He says I'll take care of all my needs if I am generous. The reason He asks me to do that is because it goes against my human nature. **My nature says** - hoard and stockpile, be fearful and insecure, thinking - I have to hold on to everything. **But Jesus said, Life isn't about keeping, it's about giving!**

What happens when I start being more generous? The Bible says in 2 Corinthians 9:8 “*God is able to make it up to you by giving you everything you need and... plenty left over to give joyfully to others.*” **God says if you practice generosity, it creates community around you.**

God is looking for people to say, "God, use me to be a blessing to other people." Bless me so I can be a blessing to others. **God promises, if you learn to be generous, He will bless you more than you can imagine.**

### **3. Generosity blesses me in return.**

It not only does generosity create community and strengthens my faith, it blesses me in return right now. The Bible explains repeatedly, God blesses those who bless others. Deuteronomy 15:10 is one example, it says "Give generously ... and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to." God says "I'll bless you in all you do and everything you put your hand to." Would you like that to happen to you? God says – be a generous person. Prayer of St. Francis

**But - do you really believe that?** If you don't believe that, you should take a pair of scissors and cut it out of the Bible. What amazes me is that some people trust God for their eternal salvation - but don't trust God with their finances. **In other words,** I can trust God to forgive all my sins and to secure my eternity in heaven - but not to keep His promise about money. I feel sorry for people who are stingy, because they don't really trust God... and as a result they miss out on many blessings. God says I want to bless you in return.

### **4. Generosity produces happiness.**

Acts 20:35 Jesus said, "*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*" Or you can read this verse – *There's more happiness in giving than receiving.* The truth is - it feels good to give.

Who's happier in life? The takers, or the givers? The givers! Takers are not happy - they're scared to death that they're going to lose what they've got. They're insecure and uptight and are not happy people. So God says, I want to produce happiness in your life because the happiest people are the most generous.

**Now here's the greatest reason to be generous. It's the most important of all.**

### **5. Generosity makes me more like God.**

Do you believe that God is generous? John 1 says that "*We have all received grace in place of grace already given.*" God is a giver. "*God so loved the world that He gave...*" You can give without loving - but you cannot love without giving – because the essence of love is giving and giving is the essence of fellowship.

That's why the Bible talks to much about giving. God talks more about giving, about generosity than about heaven or hell; and God wants us to be like Him!

That's why the word "**believe**" is used **272** times in the Bible - God wants you to believe. The word "**love**" is used **714** times in the Bible - God wants you to learn to love.

But the word "**give**" is used **2162** times - because God wants you to learn to be generous.

What God looks at is the attitude... and God wants you to be unselfish. That's why the Bible says in 2 Corinthians 9 "*You will be glorifying God through your generous gifts.*"



Do you have the attitude God wants us to have when you give? The Bible has a lot to say about having a right attitude – God is more interested in our willingness to give than how much we have to give! That’s why God said in 2 Corinthians 8:12 *“For **if the willingness is there**, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.”* God’s saying - I’m concerned about your willingness - your heart! With that attitude then I can do what I need to do in your heart.

**So God talks to us about some attitudes that He wants to develop in our heart.**

2 Corinthians 9:7 talks specifically about four key heart attitudes when you and I give *“Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”*

**We need four key attitudes:**

**1. First - give thoughtfully.**

The Bible says, *“**You have decided**....”* Don’t give impulsively. Think about it and pray about it. God wants you to think about it and pray about it and to make up your mind about what you will give. Why? Because we plan anything that’s important in our lives! And God wants our giving to be important and meaningful in our lives. So it’s a deliberate decision that’s based on prayer and consideration. **That’s a heart attitude!**

**2. Second - give enthusiastically.**

Give enthusiastically – **not reluctantly** and don't give out of a motivation of guilt! “I have to give!” Give because you know that God is going to do something in your heart, and the more you give - the more enthusiastic you will become. Why? Because there is a direct connection between giving and discipleship – giving and spiritual maturity. Remember, your giving shows where your heart is – remember Matthew 6:21, *“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*

**3. Third - give voluntarily.**

You don't give under pressure **or under compulsion**. If you feel pressured to give, don't give! We don't pressure people to give, we may communicate a need, but we don't pressure people to give. **WHY?** Because God does not bless gifts given under pressure, so why pressure you to give? ***On the other hand, every time God challenges you to give, you'd better give.*** God knows what's going on in my heart, so give voluntarily because of what God's doing in your life.

**4. Finally - God loves a person who gives cheerfully.**

**Give cheerfully!** It's interesting that one of the Greek words for offering can also be translated- **“hilarious”!** So if we're really going to do offerings right, we ought to be laughing and enjoying it. It is a hilarious thing about what God does when you and I decide to give.

**So – what are the benefits of being generous?** It creates *Koinonia* - community and strengthens our faith. God blesses us in return and produces happiness, and it makes us more like God.

**Prayer:**

Dear God, I know that everything I have is a gift from You. I'd have nothing if You weren't generous. I know that You want me to learn to be like You. Help me to remember that every time I'm generous it creates community and it defeats materialism and it strengthens my faith. Help me to see it as an investment for eternity. Jesus, I know that I'll never be able to repay what You've done for me. But I want to learn to be generous like You, giving thoughtfully and enthusiastically and voluntarily and cheerfully. This Thanksgiving I want to give my thanks through giving. First, I want to give You my life. Then I want to give back to You some of what You've given me. In Your name I pray. Amen.