An Amazing Singularity
Good Friday Sermon
The Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason
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There’s an amazing singularity to Good Friday – and not just at First Unitarian Brooklyn, where you hold your annual communion service, but throughout Christendom. This holy day occupies a special place in the church year, marking the betrayal, crucifixion, and death of Jesus of Nazareth millennia ago. It is the solemnest worship in all of Christian liturgy; some traditions commemorate it with a vivid enactment of the Passion of the Christ or Stations of the Cross, others with a Eucharistic mass, others still with Tenebrae, a descent into darkness in what is commonly called “A Service of Shadows.” Candles in the sanctuary are extinguished one by one, to signify the dying of the light, until only one flame remains – the Paschal candle, the sole bearer of hope in the darkest day and a stubborn harbinger of Easter. We have no such candle here, but we do have a chalice lit on our altar, signaling that same defiant spirit.

Today First Brooklyn pays tribute to Christian heritage of our Unitarian forbearers, those who – to borrow from the language of the venerable Ames covenant -- in the love of truth and “in the spirit of Jesus”, united for the worship of God and the service of all. The truth of Good Friday is a hard one to confront – it testifies to the reality of human suffering and the presence of cruelty in our world. It is unflinching in its witness. Where we are tempted to look away, the crucifixion compels our attention and gathers us at the foot of cross. Beyond that, it sanctifies an almost unimaginable act of torture by dignifying the Jesus’ shameful public death.

Of course, there are many contemporary corollaries to crucifixion all across the globe today – we could attempt to catalogue all those brutalities them here, but I will spare us that, because frankly, we would not even begin to do them justice. Joseph Stalin famously said that a single death is a tragedy, while a million deaths is a statistic. We need a way to recognize the millions of senseless deaths that occur each year without becoming calculating, but that demands a certain spiritual discipline on our part. When we call to
mind the life and ministry of Jesus, we are faced with his intimate acquaintance with the tragic elements of life, his deep regard for them. I mean regard in the literal sense – Jesus looked to those who struggled most mightily – he considered the blind and the lame, the ostracized and the condemned, the Jew and the Gentile, the guilty and the innocent alike. He did not turn away, even at the moment of his own death.

In the gospel account we read this evening, Jesus speaks to those family and friends who neither denied nor departed from him, saying that this terrible loss that they are facing must be faced together, that it will ultimately make kinfolk of them and strengthen their bonds. His disciple will become the son of his mother, while his mother will find in that disciple another son. In his final hours, Jesus gives us this clear testimony that our suffering is meant to be shared to one another.

Within the Roman Empire, crucifixion was intended as state-sponsored terrorism. It was designed to humiliate and isolate its victims, to drive away their survivors with the pain and shame of the event. What makes Good Friday so subversive is its refusal to stay silent about suffering, whether it be the suffering of one person or altogether too many people. In bearing witness, in telling this tale of the singular death of Jesus, this holy day points to universal human truths and intimates the nature of the divine. The Psalmist declares that God “has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; and... has not hid [God’s] face... but has heard.” The sacred resides with us through every hardship, the Psalmist and Jesus both insist, and it listens to each lamentation of ours.

Most of us hardly know what to do with this sort of theology, what conceivably we are meant to make of it. It is almost too challenging to comprehend, too profound in its sympathy, too staggering in its compassion. Its grace is the grasping kind – it reaches for us during our times of dire need, when we are tempted to let go of everything that anchors us to our lives.

A few years ago, I taught a series of workshops on prayer beads in various Unitarian Universalist setting. Most people were
immediately responsive to the prayer-bead practice I demonstrated. It allowed them to take religious devotions into their own hands, to craft a prayer cycle, to touch something holy, and to attempt a direct contact with the diving. I presented prayer beads from several different traditions: Muslim and Buddhist, Hindu and Episcopalian, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic. The Rosary I used belonged to my Catholic grandmother; it came from Jerusalem and was made of wood; the crucifix at its end and beginning showed Jesus in extremis.

Praying the rosary brought tremendous comfort to my grandmother, so she did it often. My grandmother had an assortment of rosary beads in her house at the time of her death, some lavish and ornate, even beautifully wrought, but the one I wanted to keep was the one that was so obviously reminiscent of Good Friday. It felt grounding for me in my devotions. I don’t pray the actual Rosary itself anymore – I haven’t really since I left the church in my early 20s. I use other Christian prayer beads now, often repeating the Jesus prayer from the Eastern Orthodox tradition. The refrain is simple: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” This is whispered bead after bead. When I explained that particular practice to a prayer bead workshop I was leading, one woman in the group balked. “That’s a horrible prayer,” she complained. “Why would I ask for mercy?”

The answer was so obvious to me that I spoke it without thinking. “Because life is hard,” I said. “Life can be so very hard.” I never thought Jesus Christ meant to torment us into submission until we poor humans cried uncle and begged for mercy. Everything I’d read about in the Gospels about Jesus made me believe that he understood the hardships of life and preached the widest possible mercy, not only in his last days but also throughout his years of active ministry in Judea. “Blessed are the merciful,” Jesus taught us in the Beatitudes enumerated in his Sermon on the Mount, “for they shall obtain mercy.” His teachings were regularly paradoxical, and on the day of Jesus’ death, the last and most potent paradox emerges – the cross, that diabolically engineered instrument of cruelty, would through spiritual heroics be converted into a symbol of God’s mercy embodied.
In her book, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*, feminist theologian the Rev. Dr. Serene Jones maintains simply: “The cross makes sense in ways that do not make sense.” One of the things she did at her UCC congregation was to teach a 12-week self-defense skills course to women survivors of interpersonal violence. Because the class was held on a Thursday, one spring evening, it ended just as the annual worship service for the Good Friday vigil was about to begin. About a third of the women in her class stayed for the Tenebrae service, and then remained for its entirety, watching candle after candle be extinguished while they wept together. Dr. Jones notes “that there are key points of similarity between the trauma drama (the generalized story told by trauma theorists about the structure of traumatic events and their aftermath) and the passion play (the enacted tale of Jesus’ march to the cross).” Knowing this, she was understandably concerned that the women in her class would be retraumatized by the service. They were not – instead, they found it healing.

Afterwards, Mari, of the toughest women in the class, hardened by horrific personal circumstance, told Dr. Jones: “This cross story... it’s the only part of this Christian thing I like. I get it. And, it’s like he gets me. [Jesus] knows,” she said. Her story was a powerful illustration of the psychological phenomenon that Dr. Jones calls “the mirrored cross.” According to Dr. Jones, “the mirrored cross reflects our story of suffering back to us,” and not in a way that leaves each “trauma drama” terminally unique, but rather, allows them to be interconnected. This “mirrored cross” underscores radical solidarity with and in suffering, the same solidarity that Jesus insisted on himself.

In this way, the Good Friday story can bring help, hope, and healing into people’s lives. If the singular story of Jesus’ crucifixion matters so much to human history, trauma survivors can begin to appreciate how the story of their own individual suffering might also matter and ultimately, prove transformative to themselves and others. It makes the highest use of horrific tragedy. In the Letter to the Hebrews, the earliest Christians were offered this bit of encouragement: “let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves
together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another”. The directive here is to turn toward one another in our struggles, and not away – to let hardship strengthen the ties that bind us together, not loosen them.

Understand that I do not mean to valorize or glorify suffering – quite the opposite; so much of my life’s work is devoted to sparing people this whenever it’s possible. As a community minister in the Unitarian Universalist tradition, I am trained as a clinical pastoral psychotherapist – I’ve carried my own caseload since September 2006, the month of my ordination ten years ago. In that decade, I’ve noticed that my clients who are rooted in the Christian tradition seem to have a remarkable resource in the passion play.

My longest-standing client is a woman I’ve seen nearly that entire time, an amazing survivor with such a powerful spirit. We can call her Shondah, though that’s not her real name. Shondah’s case is one of truly cataclysmic loss – her mother died of a crack cocaine overdose in her childhood; her subsequent kinship foster placement was abusive in every way; at a young age, she married a drug dealer and incurred a felony conviction in the process; their teenage son was killed by a man driving under the influence; her brother died homeless and by his own hand; and the list of tragedies goes up until the present day, when Shondah finds herself among the working poor, working a full-time job and taking public assistance, renting a room in an underserved Bronx neighborhood. Every blight that has beset black communities in America has had a powerful impact on her, personally.

Anyone else might have collapsed, but Shondah now has more than 5 years clean and sober in her recovery program and routinely offers to share her “experience, strength, and hope” with others, including family members that remain traumatized and addicted.

In our therapy session earlier this week, Shondah told me point-blank: “Jesus was tortured for no reason.” She said this almost as a declaration of faith. She’s not usually so theologically explicit, so I could tell this was an important insight of hers. When I asked her what that meant to her in her terms of family life, she said: “We were
innocent.” Shondah continually tries to communicate this belief to her sister, who continues to stay in abusive situations either with actual relatives or people who resemble early caregivers. What freed Shondah from subjecting herself from ongoing contact with her abusers, she realized, was this simple notion: “God loved me.” She didn’t need to keep the love of others at any cost because she already understood how deeply she was loved and how fully she deserved more loving treatment.

According to Dr. Jones, the allure of the cross is that “its claim is primal; it pulls all of life and history into its consuming frame”. Good Friday offers all the world a compelling instance of unmerited torment and unspeakable cruelty – to the extent that it might become salvific to us communally, Jesus’ death demonstrates that the treatment people receive is not what a loving God has intended for them. The crucifixion stands as an eternal rebuke. We ought to protest routine and systemic abuses – we out to stop them or prevent them when we can, but we need to begin by joining in the lament of those who have suffered them. We can begin with that man of sorrows that the Prophet Isaiah describes, “for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider”, and that which they had ignored they can no longer in good conscience ignore. They – rather, we – will not allow those who have suffered to feel ashamed or remain shrouded in silence. We cannot consign them to the shadows.

Every act of a communion is a call to not be alone – to not go alone – and especially not to go alone during our times of greatest need. The Psalmist proclaimed that “the afflicted shall eat and be satisified.” That seems a particularly apt sentiment this Good Friday. Millenia later, we tell the story of Jesus because we know that if we attempt to tell everybody’s story at once we run the risk of telling no story at all. But if we risk granting the significance of a particular story, it has universal implications. Each light, each singular life matters terribly. In any given sanctuary, a solitary flame can flicker such hope for so many. In our darkest hours, we see that light so clearly; in the darkest hour, it means the world that we bear witness together.