

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
Good Friday, April 14, 2017
The Rev. Bill Queen
“The Agony of the Cross”
Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12; John 18:1 – 19:42

Tom hadn't felt well in quite some time, but he flatly refused to go see a doctor; his mother, Hattie, who was a friend of mine, had tried and tried to get him to go; but he just wouldn't; Tom ended up missing so much work that he finally lost his job; then Hattie didn't hear from him for several weeks; that wasn't like Tom not to call his mother

Tom was a good kid; he'd never gotten into the kind of trouble that so many of the young men in his rough neighborhood had; I recall the photographs of Tom that Hattie had on the wall of her kitchen; he was always smiling; an innocent looking kid, even as he aged beyond his teen years; now this lovely child of hers was grown into a young man

when the call did come, it wasn't from Tom, but from Tom's friend Johnny; Johnny had called 911 first, when he noticed that Tom didn't have the strength to get himself up out of bed; Hattie had gone directly to the hospital, then she called me; she didn't know anyone else to call; Tom's father hadn't been around in years; and Hattie's own pastor wouldn't go to the hospital—he'd heard about Tom and Johnny—word always gets around in a poor, tight community; their pastor didn't approve of Tom and Johnny's “lifestyle”; so he just flatly refused to go visit him in the hospital

so I went, just as a friend; I hadn't gone to seminary yet, I wasn't ordained; but I went to the hospital; and over the next week, Hattie & I watched Tom die; his body was horribly twisted in pain; he had convulsions; he was delirious and incoherent; he was diagnosed with meningitis; that was the form that the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome played out in Tom's body; that was what finally killed him; at the funeral—it was only after death that Tom received the ministrations from his church—we sang “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?”; and all I could think about was the mother who watched her son die in agony, shunned by others

thinking about Tom & Hattie today, I can't help but be reminded of another mother who watched her son die in agony, shunned by others; this other mother was

named Mary; her son was named Jesus; the connection between these two deaths lies more than in a surface similarity; in the connection between these two deaths lies one of the deepest significances for all of us on this day of Good Friday; because what's so good about Good Friday is that it changed forever our understanding of God; what's so good about Good Friday is that it changed forever God's understanding of us, and what's so good about Good Friday is that it therefore changed forever our relationship with God
on Good Friday, God showed us a side of God never before seen
on Good Friday, God showed us just how painful God's love can be
on Good Friday, God showed us just how powerful suffering can be
on Good Friday, God showed us that the very love of God is to be found in the agony of the cross

on Good Friday, God showed us that God's love for us is so great that God loves us even though we crucified God's own Son Jesus; we crucified Jesus? you ask; yes, it was all of humanity who crucified Jesus on Good Friday; any attempt to blame the Romans or the Jews doesn't hold true—it was all of humanity who crucified Jesus on Good Friday; and we continue to crucify Jesus as you and I continue to rebel against him, as we just heard Isaiah say, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way”

on Good Friday God the Father grieved the pain and suffering God's Son was experiencing; so too did God the Holy Spirit, so intimately connected is the Spirit with both Father and Son; and when Jesus ascended to sit on the right hand of the Father, he brought to the Godhead in its entirety an understanding of human pain and suffering—from the inside—an understanding that God could not have gained any other way than through the suffering of Jesus; so whatever our hurt or anguish, whatever our own pain or the grief we feel for others, we now know it is understood, intimately, by our God, because God in Christ has experienced the absolute worst that humanity could throw at him

and so our relationship with God—as paradoxically as it may seem—became nearer and dearer on Good Friday; Good Friday brought with it an increased intimacy and understanding, based upon the agony of the cross; and whenever a mother watches a son die in agony, or any one of us experience pain, suffering, or grief, we know that God is there with us, feeling and grieving with us; the agony of the cross gives us a love, a peace, a promise, and a hope; things that surpasses all understanding; things that survive for all eternity