

The Seventh Word: “Into Your Hands I Commit My Spirit”

I can groan wholeheartedly with American writer Anne LaMott, who confesses, “The problem is, I’m not really one of those Christians who has the right personality for Good Friday, for the crucifixion part. The resurrection for Easter isn’t for two more days, and of course you have to go on faith that it will take place at all. Your mind tells you that it could all be a trick—crucifixion Friday, descent into hell Saturday, root canal Sunday.” I can relate to LaMott’s feelings: it can seem a very long distance to travel between the cloud-darkened, ravaged landscape of Friday and the light-filled garden where Mary first meets the resurrected Christ.

You’d think that the older I get—the further I progress along my “Christian walk,” as we like to say—the more comfortable I’d become with Good Friday. But that doesn’t seem to be happening. The more tangible Jesus becomes to me as a personal presence, the more gory the crucifixion appears. The cross, says Calvin scholar Victor Shepherd, “leaves all believers breathless.” It also leaves me nauseated.

We’re fond of chirping, quite truthfully, that Christians are “Easter people in a Good Friday world.” But—no matter whether we have the “right” personality or not—we must also be Good Friday people in a world that prefers sugar-coated platitudes about the human condition to hard spiritual truths. It seems bizarre to me that Easter should have become an even more candied holiday than Christmas. We’ve now gone from chocolate Easter eggs to chocolate Sponge Bobs to a six-foot-tall chocolate Jesus in a recent New York art exhibit. But the secular culture that surrounds us likes things sweet. (Which may have been the point of the chocolate Jesus—I’m not sure.) On the other hand, living as a Good Friday person means confronting the brutal, disgusting face of our sin and then surrendering it on the cross.

And that last part—the total surrender part—is what really makes me squirm. Standing at the foot of the cross, I’m forced to reappraise not just what I’ve said and done, but also who this so-called “I” actually is. Says Paul in his letter to the Galatians: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2: 20). If the power of the cross is working in our lives, it throws us into an identity crisis—a crisis we relive, day after day, as we struggle to live in the world without capitulating to it.

Isn’t that what we see happening to Jesus and his family in the drama we just heard from scripture? Mary’s response to the whole situation always seems to me so understated: “His mother said to him, ‘Son, why have you treated us like this?’” (Perhaps the gospel writer ran out of colorful verbs to capture the crisis moment. A few that I might suggest would be “his mother *yelled at him, screeched at him, or bawled at him through her near-hysterical fit.*) Editorial views aside, though, in this story of a missing child we have a clear and present crisis, with the issue of identity at its core.

Here, Jesus has the potential to make his debut as a true *wunderkind*. Once he’s wowed the religious scholars with his insights, though, he drops the possibility of pursuing superstar status. Although he mildly rebukes his parents for not fully realizing his divine nature, he turns around and heads home, where

he becomes a model of obedience, health, intelligence, and social well-being—the perfect child. And that dutiful road home leads eventually to his submission on the cross.

Was it tempting, I wonder, for the boy Jesus to scoff at his simple parents and linger a little longer at the temple, jousting with the intellectuals? In the wilderness, we know, Satan taunted him with the prospect of great worldly “authority”—was that an earlier temptation, too? We’ll never know. We can dig and dig through the gospels and we won’t find a shred of further information about Jesus’ boyhood years. The boy Jesus remains an enigma. Other teenagers need to rebel so they can become whole, mature people. In Jesus, however, obedience and identity function as twin character traits, not rival forces. That idea runs so strongly against the current of contemporary culture that it takes an event as gruesome as the crucifixion to make us recognize its truth.

When I married my husband Ken, I kept my own surname. It’s neither melodious nor memorable, but I feel it’s somehow “me,” so I’ve hung onto it. Confronted with the cross, though, what can I keep back that’s truly “mine”? The Good Friday earthquake rocks the flimsy fences I build around my self. Martin Luther King, Jr. called Jesus “the world’s most precious Person.” As such, Jesus pleads on the cross for nothing less than my entire personhood. And that, as the old spiritual says, is enough to make me tremble, tremble, tremble.

A hymn that has long been one of my favorites is “Take my life and let it be.” It embodies so beautifully the high ideals of Christian service. Take my hands, the hymn writer says; take my voice, my lips, my intellect. I like that. When I face the cross, I can say, “Yes, Lord. I’m willing to give my hands. I’m willing to give my time, my choice of vocation even, my leisure activities.”

But too often I turn aside from the harrowing mercy of the cross and leave my response at that. I don’t make it to the last verse of the hymn, where we read:

*Take myself, and I will be
ever, only, all for thee.*

Consequently, I find myself living a disembodied faith—hands and head falling out of tune with heart; mouth and feet marching devotedly along while spirit lingers behind. But being a Good Friday person means consecrating more than various body parts or social roles. A true Good Friday person kneels obediently at the cross and says, “Lord, I’m here to commit myself. My very self. Not just the “me” I construct for other people. Not just the things I own, the things I do, the choices I make—but also my inner vitality. My essence. Whatever indescribable ingredient in my being it is that makes me “me.” Into your hands I commit my spirit.