

**Jesus Shows Us Another Way – Part II:
The Way of Self-Sacrificing Love
Good Friday 2009
Fr. Joseph T. Donnelly
Sacred Heart Church, Southbury, CT, U.S.A.**

That great American philosopher, Huckleberry Finn, once commented, “It ain’t the parts of the Bible that I don’t understand that bothers me. It’s the parts I do understand.” And the Bible teaches that an inevitable part of what we call the “good news” is the cross. That message is as unembellished as the cross we will venerate here in a few minutes. Jesus calls his disciples to love. Real love, as opposed to love portrayed in music, poetry and literature, always entails sacrifice, which is to say, it always entails the cross. For Huck Finn and for us that may be bothersome.

Much as Jesus’ example of humble service that we recalled and ritualized last night at the Mass of the Lord’s Supper showed us another way to live other than the way of greed that has so undermined all areas of our life, culture and well-being in recent months, so now Jesus’ passion and death on the cross shows us more of that “other way”.

Unfortunately the cross has been all too often embellished in our day so as to ease our discomfort at beholding it or carrying it. As a result we are less able to understand and appreciate who Jesus is and how much he loves us. We have all seen the crucifixes with Jesus hanging upon them looking as if he just stepped out of central casting: dressed as a conquering king, hair combed, a blush in his cheeks and a serene look on his face. Or better

yet, we have also seen the gilded and bejeweled cross advertized as a perfect gift for Easter or First Communion or Confirmation. We would do well to move beyond those facsimiles if we are to get the true meaning of the cross not only for Jesus but more importantly for our lives as his disciples. If we are to continue to understand this “other way” that Jesus shows us in these days, the cross we consider cannot be altered to make us feel good. If anything, the way that we will know that we understand what the cross of Jesus really means is if we don’t feel good about it.

The Gospel accounts of the agony in the garden, as I mentioned last night, make it clear that Jesus really struggled with accepting the cross. In the end he did of his own free will because his Father wanted him to. So even his choosing was based upon a decision to love his Father and all of us unconditionally. Jesus approached his death not as a victim, but freely choosing to love to the end, giving his all. Even his conversation with Pilate which we just heard reveals Jesus to be a free man in that moment. It is a conversation between one free man and another. The Passion according to St. John clearly presents Jesus free and in command of his future.

I recall seeing an interview with a black South African woman who ran an orphanage for children whose parents had fallen victim to HIV/AIDS. She was being interviewed for a television program and the interviewer asked her about her hopes and dreams in life – what she wanted to achieve. She pondered the question for a few moments and then gave a surprising response. “When I die”, she said simply, “I want to have spent everything I have.” That might seem to most of us to be a desire to avoid an inheritance tax, but she went on to explain. “When I meet my maker I want to have

used up, totally and completely, every gift I have been given. I want to return to God empty-handed, when I have spent all God gave me. Then I will be ready to go home.”

While most of us would find that difficult to say, let alone live, it does give us an insight into the way of Jesus and the difference Jesus strikes with the cultural tone that has gotten us into the economic turmoil that we face today in this country. An inordinate desire to hold onto what we have and to increase what we possess is at the root of our current situation and is diametrically opposed to the way that Jesus calls his disciples to live and to love.

Now I believe that there is goodness in all people and a desire to love, to give and to serve. And there are certain times when all of that comes easily to us. But it is clear from the Gospels that this act of Jesus did not come easily to him. It involved sacrifice. And therein lies the challenge of Christ-like living. Can I love even when it costs me something? Can I love even when it costs me a lot?

One author has described the contrast between easy love and tough love in this way:

It is one thing to love when you feel love around you, when others understand you and are grateful for your person and your gifts; it is quite another when everything around you speaks of misunderstanding, jealousy, coldness and hatred.

It is one thing to maintain your ideals when they are shared by others, when the gospel works for you, when principle works out in practice; it is quite another when it seems you are alone in some ideal and when the gospel appears to be delivering more death than life.

It is one thing to keep your balance when the rhythms of life support it, when there is healthy give and take to things, when life is fair; it is quite another when things are unfair, when you are unjustly criticized, when everyone else seems to have lost balance, when, like on Good Friday, it gets dark in the middle of the day.

It is one thing to be gracious when those around you are respectful, warm and fair; it is quite another when everyone seems bitter, disrespectful, jealous and cold.

It is one thing to bless others when they want to receive a blessing, when they hang on your every word, when they want to be in your company; it is quite another when their very glance speaks of loathing and when they avoid you when you come into a room.

It is one thing to forgive others when that forgiveness seems fair, when it isn't impossible to swallow the hurt, when the wound dealt you is not mortal; it is quite another to forgive someone when it isn't fair, when the wound dealt you is mortal, when the life being murdered is your own.

It is one thing to give your life over to the family, church, community and God when you feel loved and supported by them, when they seem worth

the sacrifice, when you get a good feeling by doing it; it is quite another when you do not feel support, when it doesn't seem worthwhile, and when you feel no other reason for doing it except for truth and principle.

It is noticeable that the Gospels do not emphasize Jesus' physical suffering, nor does Jesus emphasize them when he speaks about his suffering and death before they happen. What the Gospels and Jesus emphasize is his moral loneliness, the fact that he was alone, betrayed, humiliated, misunderstood, the object of jealousy and crowd hysteria and that those who professed to love him were asleep to what was already happening to him.

Jesus' love for his Father and for us was profound and costly and it changed your life and mine. As recipients of that self-sacrificing love can we love both God and others in that way? Just consider this: How would your life be different if you loved like that? How would your marriage be different if you loved your spouse like that? How would your family life be different if you loved your family members like that? How would your social circle be different if you loved others like that and allowed that attitude to set the tone of your conversations and entertainment? How would your business be different if you approached it with that type of attitude? How would our country be different if more and more that kind of loving became the rule of thumb? How would our parish, indeed the entire Catholic Church be different if we approached our mission and our life as a community of faith like that?

Now that little voice within you chuckling that this guy is a dreamer is probably not the voice of God's Holy Spirit. But don't take my word for it. When you reverence the cross of Jesus in a few moments consider what he might say, in fact what he did say on the day we commemorate today. Consider what his unembellished cross says. Jesus is once again showing us another way!