



GOOD FRIDAY (The Seven Last Words or Women of the Stations of the Cross)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Friday, March 21, 2008

Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Associate Professor of Ethics & Director of Black Church Studies, Brite Divinity School, Fort Worth, TX

Lection – Luke 23:34, 43, 46 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 34) Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots to divide his clothing. (v. 43) He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (v. 46) Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Good Friday is a somber and poignant liturgical observance that not only turns our attention to the human suffering and divine sacrifice of Jesus on the day of his execution, but also to the roles that his most devout followers played during his final hours. Many African American Protestant congregations hold a worship service referred to as “The Seven Last Words,” which commemorates Jesus’ life and death through the preaching of a series of short homilies

consisting of the recitation and interpretation of Jesus' last words. A similar liturgical tradition by black Catholics is the observance of the last day of Jesus' life by retracing the scenes (referred to as "The Stations of the Cross") that have been traditionally portrayed as the final journey that Jesus took on that Friday. Whether Protestant or Catholic, Good Friday commemorations remind us that Jesus was loving, diligent and caring even to the end.

Good Friday services encourage Christians to contemplate Jesus' last acts and words. They instruct us to think about how we, as Jesus' modern day disciples, might follow Jesus' sojourn, and rise beyond those titles we have assumed and roles we have undertaken in our everyday life, to totally live out our faith as did Jesus' mother Mary, Mary Magdalene, and John the disciple.

We seek to live out our faith in order to meet the needs of our own souls as well as those of other suffering people in God's creation. Thus, Good Friday challenges us to think about how we might bring good news to bad situations. It also forces us to rethink how we might, in our daily living, replicate our Christian devotion by taking a spiritual pilgrimage that witnesses and proclaims Jesus' death and sacrifice by following the way of the cross.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Luke 23:34, 43, 46

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

In my Baptist tradition, on any given Sunday, most successful and memorable sermons close with a Good Friday celebration. Not only are the Good Friday refrains ("Didn't He die?" and "But he rose early Sunday morning!") peppered throughout the sermon and served to the congregation like manna from on High, but they are also a spice that enlivens the most bland sermon. While so many flawless (or failing) preachers allude to, or fall back on, the passion narrative to ensure the success of their sermons, there is something unique and resonant about this special day and its commemoration of Jesus' supreme sacrifice which demands a more respectful usage than that of sermon filler or booster. The Cross is the crux of our Christian faith. The logic is clear: without Good Friday you cannot have resurrection Sunday.

That an inordinate number of preachers (be they trained or unlettered) use the Good Friday reference when the going gets tough, on any given topic or biblical text, is proof positive that the black church is wired to the notion of the cross as the central focal point of Jesus' story. With laser-like precision, when the Good Friday moment is retold to a cold, barely nodding, unmoved congregation, said persons will awaken and revel in the awe and joy found within God's Plan for Salvation. Maybe this is so because black mothers know all too well what it means for ruling authorities to murder their sons. Maybe it is because as black people we've experienced throughout the history of America lynching of black bodies, and we know what it means to be exalted only to then be crucified as people looked on and cheered. Maybe it is because we know what it is to be betrayed by Judases and denied by Peters, supposed friends and allies. Maybe it is because we know what it means to be looked upon with contempt and hate and to have only God as your witness, guide, and support. Indeed, perhaps it is all of the above. And yet, despite the consistent retelling of the event and our personal identification with the story, the mystery and the cross of Good Friday is often elusive. Why is this so?

Why, as we celebrate Good Friday, are we often at a loss to better understand just how we get from Friday to Sunday? How do we snatch life out of the jaws of death? How do we get the good out of bad? How do we leave this earthly realm and enter paradise? Shedding new light on these age-old unspoken queries asked by every expectant soul facing a Good Friday moment, opens up a fresh word from Luke 23:34, 43, 46 that may take us on a soul's sojourn.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Our scriptural reading (Luke 23:34, 43, 46) is only a biblical representation of the larger passion narrative and its correlative services. It offers up parts of the first, second, and seventh words taken from the Seven Last Words service (Luke 23:33-34; Luke 23:39-43; John 19:25-27; Mark 15: 33-34; John 19:28; John 19:29-30; and Luke 23:46). It spotlights only the tenth through the twelfth scenes taken from the Stations of the Cross service

- (I. Jesus Is Condemned to Death;
- II. Jesus Takes Up His Cross;
- III. Jesus Falls the First Time;
- IV. Jesus Meets His Mother;
- V. Simon Helps Jesus Carry His Cross;
- VI. Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus;
- VII. Jesus Falls the Second Time;
- VIII. Jesus Meets the Women of Jerusalem;
- IX. Jesus Falls the Third Time;
- X. Jesus Is Stripped of His Garments;
- XI. Jesus Is Nailed to the Cross;
- XII. Jesus Dies on the Cross;
- XIII. Jesus Is Taken Down from the Cross;
- XIV. Jesus Is Laid in the Tomb)¹

When preached and/or performed today, the tradition has been to focus more on the story as illustrated in the aforementioned services and less on the lessons of life and learning that is contained in this lectionary's three verses. However, we should take care, when commemorating and celebrating this familiar story, to ensure that we do not miss Jesus' core lesson. Though only parts of both of these larger literary units and liturgical services are examined herein, this lection passage focuses on the way of the cross and the essential steps taken by Jesus as he transcended from his human suffering to his divine glory. As he did during his thirty-three-years of life, on his final days Jesus performs three acts that instruct and demonstrate what our earthly sojourn must be like in order to follow the way of the cross and ensure our divine destiny.

The passages are clearly divided in accord with the words spoken by Jesus, in order to more clearly focus on each lesson that Jesus taught and lived out as he suffered on the cross:

Lesson I: The act of intercession – Forgive (Luke 23:34)

As Jesus hung on the cross, he asked God's forgiveness on behalf of his enemies. Whether it was primarily the Jews, the Roman soldiers, or the particular people who had a hand in killing him at

that moment, we do not know. What is clear, however, is that forgiveness was always Jesus' divine response to human depravity. Although forgiveness is a virtue that Jesus unceasingly demonstrated until death, and one that he taught his disciples to ritually recite and practice (Luke 11:4, the Lord's Prayer), it is probably the hardest lesson to learn. As Ellis Cose states in his text Bone to Pick,² much of life is spent dealing with the pain that others have caused—chattel slavery, lynching, apartheid, genocide, gentrification, terrorism, and police brutality. This pain is difficult to deal with. Not only can going through it and accepting it be a task that sometimes takes decades or a lifetime to do, getting over it may seem virtually impossible, and might cause some to question God rather than rely on God's goodness. But Jesus' words, spoken from the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" teaches us that we should intercede for our enemies as Jesus did for the remission of our own sins—sins even more troubling in light of our human ignorance about God's divine activity in the world. Therefore, forgiveness is not just an effort to claim martyrdom or excuse evil but also to proclaim the goodness of God, and that part of the divine which is within all of humanity—that spark from which we can learn, love, and possibly experience eternal life. By exuding that divine spark through the act of forgiveness we take a higher moral ground, and this can ignite that spark of divinity that is within others. This remains the case though they seek to kill us. This is what Jesus exhibited through dying as the intercession for our sin

Lesson II: The act of assurance – Comfort (Luke 23:43)

Even as Jesus is crucified and near death, he offers comfort to one of the thieves suffering alongside him. In this gesture, he demonstrated that there is no limit, expiration date, or exemption from God's saving power for those who confess Jesus as her or his Savior. Jesus' comforting words, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" offers up an assurance that signifies simultaneous revelation and salvation. Not only does the criminal realize the divinity of Jesus and petitions him to be his savior, but Jesus also reveals that his salvation is already present as he assures him of immediate entry into paradise. The emphasis on "today" indicates that whoever confesses Christ and seeks salvation is already and at once in the presence of God, and thus enters into fellowship with God before, upon, and beyond death. Thus, as Christians we must encourage others to accept that no matter how dire their plight, or sinful their ways, that no situation nor temporal distance can separate those who confess Jesus Christ as their savior from the immediate and blessed assurance of experiencing the goodness of God amidst adversity and overwhelming oppression. This blessing counters the concept of Christianity as a faith formed by delayed blessings and "pie in the sky." This blessing assures us that we are already in fellowship with God as it instructs us to witness to others, no matter their walk or lot in life, so that today they too can be with Jesus in paradise. As biblical scholar Allen Callahan states, "Jesus' generous promise to the thief on the cross is a poignant moment in the history of justice. With his last breath Jesus affirms his solidarity with [the crucified criminal]..."

Lesson III: The act of entrusting – Commit (Luke 23:46)

As the psalmist declares in Psalms 31:5, the final words of Jesus contains a statement of faith and the act of commitment – "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." As his body is sacrificed in the face of human evil, he entrusts his spirit to the safekeeping of God. Executed as a criminal and in the company of criminals, Jesus relied on the ultimate saving power of God that would not only vindicate him but resurrect him. This prayer of supplication was echoed by many of his

followers in the early days of the Church, like Stephen (Acts 7:59) and Paul (Acts 23:6; 24:15; 26:6, 8). This last word and act demonstrates how those who have seemingly lived in terms of sacrifice should not only physically die with dignity but with confidence in God's saving power. Even in the midst of his own affliction and suffering, Jesus is able to forgive and comfort and to entrust his spirit as he realizes that this ultimate sacrifice is that which assures God's love, grace, and mercy for those of us who remember and follow the way of the cross.

Challenge

The power of our discipleship is measured by the way of the cross; remember that a Christian life is lived in three-acts – the act of intercession, the act of assurance, and the act of entrusting. In order to claim our God-given heritage, we must forgive, comfort, and commit, even in the most desperate of circumstances. It is through this sojourn that we may have life and life more abundantly, and not by the lots that the world might cast for us. We must choose in the presence of possible defeat, a certain confidence that God is present with us even in the worst times. If Good Friday were this Friday, who would you be at the Cross? What scene would represent your witness to the faith? Would you be one of the faithful Marys? The disciple John whom Jesus could trust to care for his (Jesus') mother when Jesus departed? The soldiers who cast lots for his clothes? Simon of Cyrene who helped Jesus carry his cross? The thief who scoffed at him? The favored disciple who denied him? Or the thief who uses his last breath to plead for his soul's salvation?

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: weeping women; men crying out in agony as nails are hammered into the cross; bartering as they divide Jesus' clothes (v. 34); and

Sights: Three crosses containing massacred men bruised, beaten, and bloodied (vv. 34, 43, 46).

III. Other Sermonic Comments

Quotable Insights:

- “If only we, as a people, as a nation of immigrants both willing and unwilling, could somehow return to that earlier faith of our forefathers and foremothers. Theirs was a faith in the unseen and the unwitnessed, a faith that helped them to live and grow stronger regardless of the obstacles in their path, the denial of their faith by others, the stripping away of their human dignity.”⁴
- “The kerygmatic aspect of a suffering messiah, like Jesus, especially serves as an analogue to black suffering. In their suffering, blacks have identified with the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and hence in Jesus blacks have found a true friend. While it has taken theologians and biblical scholars a long time to discover the humanity of Jesus, the humblest black Christian has always sung with enthusiasm the song ‘What a Friend We Have in Jesus.’”⁵

- “Even though you're living under the shadow of the lynching tree, religion is a spirit that is not defined by what people can do to your body. They can kill your body, but they can't kill your soul. We were always told that. There is a spirit deep in you that nobody can take away from you because it's a creation that God gave to you. Now, if you know you have a humanity that nobody can take away from you, they may lock you up. They may lynch you. But, they don't win.”⁶
- “Christianity takes us through tragedy to beyond tragedy by way of the cross to victory in the cross. Meaning that the cross is victory out of defeat. And the lynching tree is transcendent of defeat. And that's why the cross and the lynching tree belong together. That's why I have to talk about the lynching tree. Because Christians can't understand what's going on at the cross until they see it through the image of a lynching tree with black bodies hanging there. Because the Christian Gospel is a transvaluation of values. Something you cannot anticipate in this world, in this history. But, it empowers the powerless... That's what God is. Power in the powerless!”⁷

Notes

1. See Hayes, Diana L. Were You There?: Stations of the Cross. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000.
2. Cose, Ellis. Bone to Pick: Of Forgiveness, Reconciliation, Reparation, and Revenge. New York, NY: Atria Books, 2004.
3. Callahan, Allen Dwight. The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008. p. 228.
4. Hayes, Diana L. Were You There?: Stations of the Cross. p. 64.
5. Hoyt, Thomas. “Interpreting Biblical Scholarship for the Black Church Tradition.” Stony The Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation. Ed. Cain Hope Felder. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991. p. 29.
6. Cone, James. Interview. Bill Moyers Journal. PBS.Org. 23 Nov. 2007. Online location: <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/11232007/watch.html> accessed 17 December 2007
7. Ibid.