

**SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND NATHAN A. RUGH, RECTOR
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ON GOOD FRIDAY
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VICTORY

We like to think we know what victory is. We know that victory looks like triumph, like getting over, like getting beyond. Victory looks like beating the other guy and winning. For instance, if we pay attention to such things, we know this weekend is college basketball's Final Four, the culmination of a large tournament, where the four remaining teams will play a series of games for the privilege of becoming the national champion on Monday night. One team will become the champion, the victor, over all the others.

We take this perspective on victory into other areas of our lives as well. If one has become wealthy or famous, they are said to be winning at life. In politics, our cable news show rarely ask if political events or decisions are beneficial for the common good or will positively affect the nation or the world as a whole, but rather ask which party or politician has emerged triumphant. We think of wars in this way too, even though wars are never discrete winnable things. Wars always have reverberating and unforeseen negative effects, even for the victors.

We think we know what victory is. Victory looks like dominating. Victory look like power. It looks like imposing one's will on the world and on other people. And if we turn our attention to the events of Jesus' passion and death with the eyes of the world, then these events appear to be nothing but an utter defeat. Jesus is betrayed by a friend to his political opponents, who in turn arrest him and put him on trial. In the process, Jesus is abandoned by the rest of his friends and one of them even denies knowing him. At his trial, Jesus is condemned as guilty. He is beaten and tortured. He is given a crown, but it is a crown of thorns. He is given a purple robe of royalty, but it is given merely to mock him. When they are done with him, Jesus is then publicly and shamefully executed by the Romans in a manner of death reserved for slaves and political dissidents.

With the eyes of the world, Jesus seems defeated. And of course, it is not just Jesus as a person who seems defeated, but rather all that he represents. His life's mission of proclaiming the Kingdom of God appears to be discredited. He broke down social barriers that divided people from one another. He proposed an ethic that was inherently nonviolent. He healed those who were sick and pronounced forgiveness to those who were broken. All of this seems for not. Jesus showed us a different way to live in accordance with the power of love, but now this all seem to be in ruins.

Let's look at what this means, for his was a way of solidarity, but this solidarity seems crushed. Jesus identifies himself with those who are the most vulnerable and exposed. He sees himself, and asks his followers to see him, in the hungry and thirsty, in the sick and the naked and the prisoner. He sees himself in the victims of this world and our structures and systems. He sees himself in those who suffer.

As such, not only is he in solidarity with us in our suffering, but he is also in solidarity with all those we harm, either through our actions or through our inaction. He is with us when we are victims, but he is with our victims as well. And now, as Jesus is crucified, this way of solidarity also seems defeated.

And on top of all this, his is a life that reveals the presence and power of God. Jesus does the things that only God could seem to do. He reveals power over the forces of evil as he exorcises demons. He calms storms and walks on water. He feeds a vast multitude with only a few loaves of bread and fish. He forgives sins. He raises the dead. It would appear that on the cross, even the power and presence of God has been defeated. On the cross, as Jesus dies, it might seem too that God dies. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian and martyr of the Nazis, once said of Good Friday, "God lets God's self be pushed out of the world on to the cross."

And with Jesus' defeat, are we not also defeated? Has the world not also been defeated as we destroy our only hope to awake from the nightmare of history? Are we now not left trying to scramble atop one another in the vain hope of having our moment in the sun before we too have died?

The mystery and the paradox of this day is that, though this looks like defeat for Jesus, and thus of our hope, this is in fact a day of victory. We cannot deny the anxiety and suffering and pain. We dare not ignore the torture and agony. This is a day of dread and despair, a day of death.

And yet, the paradox is that the darkness is the light. The darkness is the light and the love of God, as seen from our finite and fallen position. John's Gospel reveals the freedom Jesus has throughout all of the events leading up to his death. Jesus is indeed the most free person of them all. For everyone else from his disciples, to the religious authorities, to the crowd, to the soldiers, and even up to Pilate, they all seem caught up in something bigger than themselves. They all seem trapped in a web of brokenness that binds the human family in cycles of violence and degradation. But Jesus is free in his obedience to the one he calls Abba, Father.

And in this obedience Jesus, as the embodied light of God, brings light into the very heart of this web of our brokenness. Jesus is the light of God's love for us that shines even in the midst of our abject despair and deepest alienation. Before Jesus commits his Spirit to the Father, he declares, "It is finished." It is finished, this is not a resignation to fate, but the proclamation of attainment. "It is finished" could just as easily have been translated as "it is accomplished". For on the cross, Jesus has become fully glorified and so too God has been glorified.

For, this is the glory of God, that God comes to be with us in the deepest depths of our brokenness. This is the glory of God, that a symbol of humiliating death can become for us a source of new life. This is the glory of God, that our "no" to God can be transformed into God's "yes" to us.

For here God saves us. Here God reconciles us to God's self. Here we are redeemed.

We like to think we know what victory is. We like to think we know what triumph looks like, what glory looks like. But here on the cross of Christ, this is the victory of God.