

“Lay Down Your Life”

John 18:1-19:42

Part VIII of IX in the sermon series: “Christianity 101”

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From the Pulpit

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A meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Good Friday, April 10, 2020 dedicated to the memory of Gina Harris and to honor her grieving family, especially Dayna McCrary; to the memory of Arlene Weems and to her grieving daughters and family; to Arnold Vargas and the memory of his husband Dr. Frank Gabrin; to all doctors and nurses everywhere caring for all patients but especially the 1,200,000+ globally with COVID19; to all the individuals and families who are faithfully living out the “Stay at home” mandate in Ohio and beyond and to all that this means; to all Christians and Jews who are finding new ways to celebrate Holy Week, Easter and Passover this year in the midst of a global pandemic; and to all Christians at the foot of the cross tonight and always to the Glory of God!

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Please pray with me: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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We kneel at the foot of the cross tonight in the face of senseless suffering. Tonight, we are surrounded by billions of others who are on their knees in the midst of a global pandemic. Those who have lost their loved ones are overcome by their pain and their grief. Their eyes cannot be dried. They are inconsolable. They are sad beyond belief. No words can dent their pain. And yet, as we are separated, one from another, it is only words we have to give them.

How can Hope be expressed in the face of such suffering as this? Where do we find answers in the midst of such suffering and loss? We are not the first to be crumpled and crushed by such suffering. We will not be the last.

In his book, *Night*, survivor of the Holocaust and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Elie Wiesel relates this story that happened to him as a 16-year-old prisoner at Auschwitz: Today, the SS hung two Jewish men and a boy before the assembled inhabitants of the camp. The men died quickly but the death struggle of the boy lasted half an hour. “*Where is God? Where is he?*” a man behind me asked. As the boy, after a long time, was still in agony on the rope I heard the man cry again, “*Where is God now?*” and I heard a small voice within me answer, “*Here he is – God is hanging on the gallows...*”

It is difficult to speak of this horror. It is difficult to speak of the horror of the cross. But we must remember that God is not the executioner. God is not the torturer or the tyrant. Between the sufferer and the one who causes his suffering, between the

victim and the executioner, God is on the side of the sufferer. God is on the side of the victim. God is being hanged on the gallows. God is dying on the cross (reference to Dorothee Soelle, “On the Gallows,” from *Suffering*, transl. Everett Kalin, Philadelphia, PA, Fortress Press, 1975).

But what about the child hanging there? What about the son of God hanging there? We too easily say, “*He is with God. He is in heaven. He is at peace.*” And when we say these things, a cynicism settles into the soul of the speaker and even more into the souls of the listeners.

Followers of Jesus and anyone else listening tonight, hear only the sounds of suffering unto death.

Tonight, we should all get out of the way. We should all be silent. We should all listen to those who have lost so much.

Listen to the Centurion in Mark who proclaims, “*Truly this was God’s son.*” Listen to young Elie Wiesel, “*Here is God – he is hanging here on the gallows.*” You see, every one of the six million who died in the Holocaust was God’s beloved son, God’s beloved daughter. Just as every one of the tens of thousands of our global brothers and sisters who have died from COVID19 was God’s beloved son and God’s beloved daughter. If we say any different, shame on us.

Listen to the grief-stricken voices of faithful men and women who cry and can barely speak; who weep and have almost no

words to express how deep their pain and how great their loss. Only tears. Only heartbroken sobbing. LISTEN.

On this night when Passover and Passion meet at the gallows, just LISTEN. Hear the cries of every one of God's son and daughter who suffer in this pandemic and all the other children of God whose suffering unto death has been inflicted by tyrants and torturers. Tonight, LISTEN to the cries of refugee children in our war-torn world, listen to women, men and children screaming in pain from abuse and neglect – unto death.

Tonight, God is not in Heaven. God is on the Gallows. God is on the cross. God is in the tears of everyone who suffers now. And God's Love is no other-worldly or beyond us in heaven kind of Love. God's Love is hanging there right in front of us.

And now it ends – this suffering unto death. Our young man, hanging there, has laid down his life for us, and says to us, and to any who will listen down through the ages, *"It is finished."*

He gives up his Spirit. As he dies, he dies for and with all the beloved sons and daughters of God who have come before him and all who come after him – suffering unto death.

And then he is gone.

Where is God now?

Here he is – he hanging here for us. He is hanging here with us.

Amen.

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