

Good Friday
April 9, 2017
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Isaiah 52:12—53:12
Psalm 22
Hebrews 10:16-25
John 18:1—19:42

A number of us here at Trinity took part in a book discussion during Lent this year. Our book was *Uncommon Gratitude*, by Sister Joan Chittister and Archbishop Rowan Williams.

In one of the chapters, Joan Chittister tells a story about a cruel warlord. “People were terrified by his tortures and his murderous glee,” she writes. And so, whenever people heard he was coming to their village, they fled. Accordingly, his triumph was always certain, wherever he went ... that is, until he came to one village. There, too, the people all fled, except for one old monastic who refused to go.

This, Sister Joan says, is what happened next:

The warlord howled in rage. “Bring that one to me immediately, he bellowed.

When they dragged the old monastic before the commander, the general roared for all to hear, “Do you not know who I am? I am he who can run you through with a sword and never even bat an eye.”

And the old monastic looked up at the warlord calmly and replied, “And do you not know who I am? I am the one who can let you run me through with a sword – and never even bat an eye.”ⁱ

Joan Chittister tells the story to illustrate the power of a peacemaker in the face of a warlord. It’s an apt story for us this day, as we reflect on the crucifixion of Jesus. We sometimes call him the “Prince of Peace.” His manner of death – and his refusal to be made nothing more than a victim in the face of horrific cruelty – are, to my mind, powerfully reminiscent of the warlord story.

Sister Joan doesn’t say where the story comes from, but it sounds to me like a story from ancient China, perhaps because it reminds me of another story. This other story was told in a movie called “Hero.” It was one of two Chinese films from several years ago. The more popular film was “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon.” Both of them were art films, with magical realism and a lot of martial arts and drama added to the mix. Though it was less popular, “Hero” may have been the better. And it included a scene that bears on our observance of Good Friday.

The scene includes just two characters, a woman named Flying Snow and a man named Broken Sword. They are warriors and they are lovers ... but mostly they are warriors. Flying Snow and Broken Arrow are, both of them, masters of the sword, the most feared fighters in the land. Together, the two of them have stood up to – and decimated – whole armies. And together, they have joined themselves to defeat their enemies, especially the king of Qin.

But near the end of the movie, Broken Sword has a change of heart. He refuses to continue as before, and Flying Snow is livid. She challenges him to explain himself, to explain his betrayal of what she took to be their common cause. And he tries ... he tries to explain to her how it has become his overriding desire to end the warfare that ravages their land ... he tries to justify, as he puts it, "what's in his heart."

Unconvinced, Flying Snow asks, "Is that all there is in your heart?"

"There is also you," he replies.

And when she seems unimpressed, he adds, "How can I convince you?"

Without hesitating, she reaches behind her and pulls out two swords and tosses one of the two swords to him as she unsheathes the other, and then she demands that he draw his sword.

"Is the sword the only answer?" he pleads.

To which she insists, "I just want you to draw your sword."

Her insistence that he fight her is a thing that clearly pains him, but after several agonizing moments, Broken Arrow reluctantly unsheathes his sword and the two lovers become fighters. She lunges at him and he seems unready until, at the last moment, he adopts a defensive position and they thrust and block, swing and swirl.

They are evenly-matched with the sword. It seems that their battle may end in a stand-off as they step back and take stock of one another. Then she, the aggressor, lunges once more at him with her sword. And he, as before, adopts a defensive position. But this last time, at the absolute last moment, Broken Arrow drops his sword and leaves himself undefended. Flying Snow has no time to pull back. She runs him through.

And in that moment, her anger turns first to shock and then to dismay and finally to regret and, in the end, only sorrow. "Why did you not defend yourself?" she asks, as he collapses to the ground.

"So you would finally believe me" is the only answer he can offer before he dies.

For me at least, there is something about that scene that echoes what happens between all of humanity and our God on the cross. Throughout the whole of his ministry, Jesus told of God's love, of God's unremitting love for all of us. And the profession of God's love in Jesus was met with such disbelief that we put that love to the ultimate test.

"Why does Jesus die on the cross?" we might ask.

“So we would finally believe him” may be the only answer we are offered.

All throughout his ministry, Jesus preached (in the words he spoke and the acts he performed) of God’s love. In the hours before his death, his love for us became his preoccupying concern. On that night before his death, Jesus announced that his work was done and he offered a final prayer to God, which features these words:

The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

John 17:22-23

But some betray him and others deny him, while still others watch helplessly as their teacher dies.

And when Jesus finally utters his final words on the cross, three words sum up everything. “It is finished,” he says, before breathing his last breath, which I take to mean that there is now really nothing more he can do to make God known to us than what he has already done. The cross is how we know that everything Jesus was telling us is true, that even if it means dying this horrific death on the cross, he won’t call down the legions of angels.

“Why does Jesus die on the cross?”

“So we would finally believe him.”

In the end, if the only way we’ll believe that God loves us completely and unreservedly ... if the only way we’ll believe that God loves us so unflinchingly is for Jesus to leave us free to do our worst, so be it.

In the hope that we might finally come to see that God loves us so – and in the hope that we who have been so well-loved might be moved to do our best – Jesus loves us to the end. That’s the power of Jesus, the peace-maker ... of Jesus, the love-bearer.

I close with an apt prayer from our Prayer Book service of Morning Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name.
Amen. (*Book of Common Prayer*, p. 101)

¹ Joan Chittister, from the chapter on “Peace,” in *Uncommon Gratitude: Alleluia For All That Is* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2010), pp. 123-124.