

We bring you greetings from the people of the United Congregational Church – just a few blocks from here on Appleton Street. We've joined with you several times in the past several years, and we thank the Rev. Marisa Egerstrom for bringing your invitation to us to join you once again.

Good Friday is one of the great mysteries of Christianity. It tells a story of such great power, yet popular culture doesn't know what to do with it.

Most Christian holidays have a religious side – Christmas has the birth of Jesus, Joseph and Mary, an Innkeeper, the shepherds and magi and their shining star – but the pop culture has added Santa Claus, Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer, sugar plum fairies, the little drummer boy, and countless stories that have become beloved.

The religious story of Easter tells about grieving women walking to a tomb at sunrise, about incredulous disciples, about a gardener, and about a figure thought to be Jesus. But pop culture has added the Easter Bunny, colorful eggs hatching little chicks, flowers popping, and of course, boxes of candy. Often the pop culture story has only the thinnest connection to the religious story.

I don't know why that is. But it just *is*.

I find it interesting that when Christians come to Good Friday, there is only the Son of God hanging from the nails that hold him to the cross. Pop culture doesn't know how to act: there are no special sales in the stores, no box of candy, no cards to open, and

no common greeting, like “Merry” or “Happy.” Nobody wishes you a “Good Friday!”

This one, lone holiday has never, triggered a marketing strategy. And why is that? I think it’s because Jesus’ crucifixion, suffering, and death is too close to the human heart. It touches something so deep that we can’t easily grasp the full meaning – except through art and music, poetry and sacred rituals. Some of the hymns we sing take us to that “Green Hill Far Away” – where we can feel the pain of that “Sacred Head, Now Wounded.”

And poetry can help us enter the meanings. Here’s a stanza from a poem by Wendell Berry:

*I read of Christ crucified,
the only begotten Son
sacrificed to flesh
and time and all our woe.
He died and rose, but **who does not tremble**
for his pain, his loneliness,
and the darkness of the sixth hour?
Unless **we grieve** like Mary
at His grave, giving Him up
as lost, no Easter morning comes.*

No, you do not sell Santa Clauses and Easter Bunnies – or boxes of candy – with that grief – but you touch the heart of your humanity in the very place where God can be encountered. Would you not want to know the God who welcomes all? Would you not want to be healed with that word of love?

When I was growing up in Wisconsin, I was taught that we humans are sinful, by nature, and that Jesus died so that our sins could be forgiven. To reinforce that understanding, we repeated a confession of sin at every Sunday service:

“ALMIGHTY and most merciful Father; We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done.....”

I thought that was a Congregational Church prayer. But you know what? I discovered just this week that it comes from your Book of Common Prayer! We were using your prayer! Wow!

So in many of our church traditions, we have heard that we are sinners; that we are guilty and in need of forgiveness. Indeed, the feeling of guilt can be overwhelming. If that is your understanding -- that Jesus died for our sins --thanks be to God! Pop culture has no idea how to profit from that.

But, as I said, there is another way to think about Good Friday. In this way, the issue is setting aside fear in order to live by faith.

Fear is a natural part of life. Fear of change, fear of loss, fear of death, fear of anything that’s going to cause pain. But scriptures keep saying “Fear not, for I am with you;” “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” “God will calm your fears.” “Do not be afraid or terrified;” “God will calm your fears.” This is spoken almost as often as Jesus saying “Love one another.”

So, what if, instead of looking at Jesus as dying to save us from our sins, some of our friends saw Jesus as an example of trusting God and setting aside all fear?

God's messengers have always said, "Love one another;" and "Fear not." So when Jesus disregarded convention and healed people on the sabbath, when he talked freely with a woman accused of sinful behavior, when he looked right past someone's disease, he was setting his own fear aside.

On Good Friday, Jesus did not fear the religious authorities or the imperial authorities. He did not fear the stress of being interrogated. He did not fear being tied up and whipped. He did not fear being rejected by the crowds. He did not fear being nailed to a cross. And by turning his back on fear, he claimed calling. By setting aside fear, he was able to risk everything on behalf of Love.

So, most of us know that Jesus died to save us from our sins. And a few of us know that in life and in death, he held faithfully to the character that God gave him. Jesus would not turn his back on Character, neither should we.

There are no greeting cards, no box of candy, no cartoon animal to soften the image of Jesus living out the authentic character that God gave him. This is the one holiday of the Christian Year that strikes so deep in the human heart, that to learn from it is to sample eternity. May we all live long enough to taste and see eternity in our everyday lives. AMEN