

Good Friday + April 22, 2011

A pilgrimage is a journey (usually a very long journey) to some sacred or holy place. People often take pilgrimages to these sacred places as acts of worship. So, for example, the Holy Land, home to some of the sacred sites we read about in Scripture, has long been a destination for pilgrims. One pilgrimage to the Holy Land has had tremendous influence on what we Christians do during these days and that is the pilgrimage of Egeria, a Nun from the 4th century who traveled some 3,000 miles from Gaul to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem. We know something of her travels because she kept a diary describing all that took place during Holy Week.

Egeria described in great detail the service on Good Friday. It took place at Golgotha, the site of Jesus' crucifixion. There at the Chapel behind the Cross, the wood of the Cross on which Jesus died was placed on a table. Pilgrims would come forward, one by one, to view and adore the wood of the Cross by touching it, kissing it, or engaging in some act of reverence. This took place in the morning until about Noon. Then there were prayers and at 3:00 the Passion story from the Gospel of John was read. Egeria reports that one of the overzealous pilgrims who came forward to reverence the cross got a little carried away and bit into the wood, taking a piece of the cross away in his teeth. From that point on, guards would keep an eye on things.

This practice of reverencing the cross spread throughout the Christian world and continues to this day. Along with Christians around the world, we will venerate the Cross in a few moments after it is brought into procession and laid before us. You will have opportunity to come forward. You may stand and linger before the Cross or kneel. You may touch the Cross or kiss it or reverence it in some way. You may pray before the Cross. You may choose to stay seated and simply listen to or participate in the singing. There is no rule about it. Feel free to embrace the time and participate in it however you wish.

We engage in this gesture as a way to simply behold the mystery and the mystery is that somehow this sign of death has been transformed by God into a sign of life. No, there was nothing good in what humanity did to Jesus but there was everything good in what God did. The Gospel of John put it this way: Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. The love of God freely given. What were Jesus' final words from the Cross? "It is finished." A task accomplished. Now complete. The work done. Hear in that declaration a note of triumph. It is the triumph of love. God has accomplished what God came down in Jesus to do. We did not have to reach for God. In great love, God to us and

lived and died among us to complete the work of a love that has set us free. Our task today isn't to somehow explain it but to receive it – to take it all in and behold the mystery.

Should you take the opportunity to reverence the Cross, see it as a kind of little pilgrimage to the Cross. No, we're not going to Golgotha to visit the real cross Egeria wrote about in her diaries, but here, even here in this act of prayer around this cross we really do reverence the true cross. For what we come to know again is that God has laid the Cross cross in the center of this community and God has laid the true cross in the center of every community that bears his name. It is the mark of love triumphing over death ... a love so broad and wide that the arms of the Savior extended on the Cross is a love that extends to the entire world. And so, the needs of the entire world becomes the focus of our Good Friday prayers in just a few moments.

See the procession to the Cross tonight as a kind of little pilgrimage. For that matter, imagine all of our praying and singing and reflecting as a pilgrimage. In fact, journeying through these Three Days is a kind of pilgrimage as we discover again the truth of who God is and that this love freely given by God is the true power at work in the world saving us, redeeming us, making us whole.

Today our worship is in solidarity with Christians every week and we especially think of sisters and brothers from our congregation as well as Faith Lutheran in Meadow Vista who are in Mexico this week. They will return tomorrow in time for the Easter Vigil. They have chosen to describe their trip this week as a pilgrimage. How very appropriate. No, they did not visit a shrine or a statue but to join sisters and brothers in Tijuana in their ministry of providing food, warmth and shelter to the needy neighbors. Their singular focus was to be in relationship with others and to engage in the work of justice and service. Isn't that where the Cross beckons us? The daily pilgrimages of encountering Jesus in our neighbor. Yes, we have come to know the true Cross. It was first marked on our foreheads in Baptism. What we get to do is proclaim in word and deed and service the very love of God given to us by the one who proclaimed "It is finished!" Tonight we bow in wonder and awe at the amazing gift. Amen.