

The Reverend Doctor Peter J. Gomes died in February this year, he was 68. Peter Gomes was a professor of Christian morals, and minister at the Memorial Church at the Harvard Divinity School. He was a black American Baptist and he was gay. One of the most influential books in my library is his, it's called "The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Heart and Mind." There are three things we dare not do with the Bible, says Gomes if we are to engage the bible seriously.

- do not worship the bible as if it were the fourth person of the trinity
- do not get the bible to settle an argument by lifting a passage out of its context and using it to advance your position
- do not take the bible literally

As I heard Marion read this passage this morning, I was reminded of Peter Gomes' book and the fact that he was a gay black Baptist serving in one of the most prestigious academic institutions in the world. I was also reminded of the reason why slavery in the United States took so long to be abolished. Both sides of the issue argued for their position by proof texting the bible. And as Marion read, I could imagine hearing the pro-slavery side debate the topic, using this very passage. <sup>18</sup>Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval."

I can hardly speak the words; I choke on their message in our contemporary culture. And yet these words have been used by the church, politicians, schools to perpetuate systems of segregation, for keeping women in abusive marriages, and for using violence as a way of correction. Take it says the church...just like Jesus took it. Anyone else absolutely squirming here this morning?

For those of you who missed last week, I am exploring three images from the Christian tradition that will have sticking power as we forge into new and uncharted ways of being the Christian church in the future. In his book "Reimagining Christianity" Alan Jones, former Dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco has suggested that in reclaiming the sacred, which has been lost in the worlds we create most especially in cyber space; these three images help us to get to what is really real about being human, created in the image of God. Last week, we wondered about the table as a symbol for radical hospitality.

Today, the cross we haul out for Good Friday stands pretty stark among us. The raw, crude image of an executioner's weapon is an image I abhor – an image of suffering, of systems of domination that lead to death, of our human capacity for violence and humiliation. And yet Alan Jones suggests this image reminds us that the church of Jesus Christ stands in solidarity with the human experience of suffering. The cross is a reminder to the world that just as we suffer, Jesus' community identifies with those who suffer, standing with them as individuals and seeking justice as we rail against systems that contribute to corporate suffering. I understand Alan Jones to say the cross stands as a witness to radical compassion.

How can a cross – and all those things I've described it to be – stand as a witness to compassion? Anyone else stymied by that question? Can't there be another symbol for compassion? Can't there be another sign we could show to the contemporary world that the community of Jesus' followers stands with those who suffer? What might that be? These prayer shawls? A healing touch table? An empty tomb?

I'd say anything else, please, because the cross is so abhorrent to me. And this passage that Marion read is not particularly helpful. Dogma coming at us in the form of scripture doesn't solve the question. A message of "take it, just like Jesus took it" isn't particularly satisfying when it leads to the justification of centuries of abuse and domination.

So rather than begin with the scripture...let's begin with the human experience. What happens when we suffer? Suffering, according to our Buddhist friends is directly connected to our attachments. The stronger our ego attachments - the things we think we need to be complete in the world – a marriage partner, a job, a fancy house or car, smart children, healthy parents, a good credit rating - the more painful our experience when we no longer have them. Suffering is directly linked to attachment...according to Buddhist teaching. My wife would say so what, our attachments make us alive in this world and I'm hard pressed to disagree. So when we lose them we do suffer.

In the Christian tradition, on Good Friday, we gaze at Jesus on the cross. Beaten, bleeding from his head, his hands and his feet we hear the last seven things he said:

Father forgive them, for they know not what they do  
Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise  
Woman, behold your son: behold your mother  
My God, My God, why have you forsaken me  
I thirst

It is finished  
Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit.

When people come to terms with the reality of their own death, according to Elisabeth Kubler Ross, we go through all of these experiences. In no particular order...we go through denial, protest, bargaining, depression, acceptance. And here, on the cross, we hear Jesus experience our own experience. On the cross he knows our suffering, identifies with it, goes through the same stages we go through in our own death, whether we're actually dying or mired in an experience that feels like death. On the cross he knows the human condition. As his followers we know these things too.

In first Nation's traditions there are two experiences that speak directly to human suffering. Today, in Northern Saskatchewan first nation's Christian communities, whenever people experience the pain of living life - an addiction, a painful experience, an injustice, whatever - they have an expression "throw it at the cross." They actually come into their churches, imagine the mess they're dealing with as a ball of crud, and physically hurl it at the cross in the sanctuary. Let it die on that place of death. Pray for its transformation.

A second experience. I remember at a meeting of BC Conference, Doreen Clemelin, a first nations elder from the north, spoke to the court about something that was on her heart, that brought the court to silence. I was at the piano. When I looked up...about 25 people were standing around her in solidarity. That's the first nations' tradition. Whenever anyone is grieving, or suffering, or calling out for justice, it is customary for the community to stand with them. The community cannot take the individual's pain away; they can only stand with them as they experience it.

I find comfort in these two experiences. The word compassion comes from two latin root words...*com* means with. *Passio* means to suffer. The real meaning of the word compassion is to suffer with. When the followers of Jesus, the Christ, community gathers around those who suffer, for whatever reason, regardless of attachment, there is healing. That is also the human experience. And when we hold up the human experience up to the light of the Christian tradition...we remember what Marion read this morning...in the muck of all those words "by his wounds, you are healed."

Friends as stark and ugly as the cross appears, it remains the symbol we see, and the symbol we hold out to the world to remind people that in this place, we stand with you in whatever suffering you experience. Jesus radical compassion is lived out here. May it continue to be so. Amen.