

**Good Friday – April 19, 2019 – Sarah D. Odderstol – St. John’s Broad Creek
Isaiah 52.13-53.12 – Psalm 22 – Hebrews 4.14-16, 5.7-9 – John 18.1-19.42**

I have long believed that people who attend Good Friday liturgies should get a medal – a ribbon for participation in the very least. On Good Friday we confront the darkest shadows humanity casts: gross abuse of power, torture, betrayal, abandonment, and suffering...those experiences that can make death sound merciful. I would love to be able to dress up life’s tragic underbelly in pastel lace and an Easter bonnet and just offer you a dignified and beautiful liturgy, but I cannot. That would be an abuse of my power. You see...Good Friday is the only day on the church calendar when we are forced to be really real about life. Life is hard – there are days (sometimes many days) when we see no light – no hope. Humankind is capable of truly depraved evil – a stain few lives avoid.

In a beautifully crafted narrative with irony so potent Shakespeare looks anemic, the author of John’s Gospel parades out humankind’s dirty laundry and hangs the stinking mess right next to God incarnate. John’s Gospel presents a portrait of Jesus as King of the Jews. A man in complete charge of his own destiny who makes an offering of his life – in the presence of religious authorities who lose faith in the name of religion and government officials who lose power in the name of authority.

After his betrayal and arrest, Jesus is taken for questioning before the religious leaders of his faith, first Annas and then Caiaphas. While simultaneously, Peter is being questioned by those around him about his connections to Jesus of Nazareth. We are presented with two trials in these scenes: one in which Jesus affirms his innocence in consistent testimony and yet is punished with a brutal slap on the face by a guard and another in which Peter rejects and abandons his master and Lord and yet goes free.

How often do we participate in this drama? We witness bullying or harassment or discrimination and not only do we fail to rise to the victim’s defense but we brush the scene off as “just the way things are...” Or we hear someone speaking untruths about another person, or another faith, or another culture and we say nothing for fear of rocking the boat. In both cases, someone is wrongfully convicted and we walk away with Peter.

Next Jesus is brought before Pilate and we are told that the Jewish authorities will not enter the Roman praetorium for fear that they will become ritually defiled and therefore unable to participate in the Passover feast. Thus Pilate is forced to move back and forth – talking to the religious authorities on the outside of the praetorium and with Jesus on the inside of the building. The careful staging of this story highlights not only Pilate relinquishing his power but also the ludicrous behavior of the religious people. There they were so preoccupied with eating the Passover lamb, but all the while preparing for the death of the Lamb of God.

When you went shopping for your Easter dinner, did you check to see if your meat and eggs were ethically raised? How about those veggies? Were they harvested by workers who earn a living wage? Was everything you bought packaged in environmentally sensitive packaging? Who suffers because we want things good and cheap and quick?

All right, enough of the ways that John's gospel skewers humankind for crimes against humanity. Our gospeler also compassionately acknowledges that his readers have spent time on both sides of life's coin: we are perpetrators and we are victims. Jesus is betrayed and wrongly convicted. He is abandoned and tortured. He is left to suffer an agonizing death. Jesus has been to the dark and the lonely and the ugly places of this life.

As humans, we long to be understood. God knows this and so does Nora McNerny. McNerny is the host of the unlikely popular podcast, *Terrible, Thanks for Asking*.¹ *Terrible, Thanks for Asking* is a podcast about the horrors that face humanity: cancer, suicide, sexual abuse, mass shootings... Each week the podcast digs deep and allows listeners to think about the pain we live through, how we face it, tackle it, and collapse under its weight. The show gives permission to grieve, to go on living, to be happy and sad...all at the same time. *Terrible, Thanks for Asking* has been listened to more than 14 million times. Suffering resonates.

Terrible, Thanks for Asking was born out of Nora McNerny's own loss and grief. In the weeks before her husband died of brain cancer, the 33-year-old mother watched her father die and suffered a miscarriage. As she struggled to regain her footing, she found there were others around her, who like her, had nowhere to go with their grief and anger and loss. She said it was not that she or others like her were friendless or family-less...just that the people around them were afraid to talk to them about their tragedy.

McNerny began her podcast because she believes in the importance of facing difficult subjects head-on. She says, "We do a really good job, especially in the U.S., of making sure we avoid everything uncomfortable." But running from pain is impossible, because "it will catch you eventually. So you might as well be open to the experience and open to witnessing those experiences in other people because someday something terrible is going to happen to you or to someone you love. Actually, that's a guarantee."

One of her guests, who still lives in the shadow of his wife's murder, said, "I admire Nora McNerny for her tenacity and willingness to explore tough issues while building community...*Terrible, Thanks for Asking* reminds me that I am not alone in the face of this terrible loss."

Good Friday offers us no light to see a path forward in the deadly dark of Jesus' betrayal, abandonment, torture, and death. It's too soon...the loss is too fresh. We know, however, we are not alone in this place. There are those like Jesus' mother and Mary Magdalene who stay at our side. There are others like Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who unbeknownst to us, do what they can to make the best of a bad situation. We are never alone: not in the disasters of our own making...not in the tragedies that descend upon us. We are never... ever... alone.

¹ Marjorie Brimley, "Tell her where it hurts," *The Washington Post*, Section C Tuesday, April 9, 2-19.