

**A homily preached by the Rev. Martin L. Smith at the Church of the  
Transfiguration, New York, on Good Friday, April 14, 2006**

“Is it nothing unto you, all ye that pass by? Behold and consider whether there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow?” (Lam. 1:12) These ancient words from the Book of Lamentations have been used by Christians for almost two thousand years to guide their worship on Good Friday. They are in keeping with the sobriety of the gospel accounts of Jesus’ passion, especially with the gospel of John. The evangelists make no attempt to wring our emotions with horror and pathos. The story is told in such a way that we are not forced to feel. They invite us to identify with what is happening in our own way. We are asked to look for ourselves and consider whether we believe it has anything to do with our lives. “Is it nothing unto you?” Only we can give the answer.

“Consider” Perhaps we can get some help from the writer of the letter to the Hebrews who uses this very word to invite us into the exploration of the secret of the Passion. You will find this verse in chapter 12: “Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners.” (Hebs. 12:3) There is something very odd about this verse. Many of the oldest and best Greek manuscripts say something different here. “Consider him who endured such hostility from sinners *against themselves*.” On first reading this scarcely makes sense. And surely that was the reason a scribe decided to change it, assuming a mistake had been made in the copy he was working from. But in fact the original is a clue to the deepest meaning of the Passion. Humanity is profoundly afflicted with self-destructiveness. Our propensity to violence, to scapegoating, is rooted in an inner self-rejection. We make others pay the price for our own hidden self-loathing. In the passion of Christ we see the beloved of God as the ultimate victim of humanity’s fear and mistrust, our self-destructive rejection of the gift of life.

Of course, the gospels don’t spell this out on the surface. Instead they invite us to look first into the eyes of Judas. The gospel gives us no explanation of Judas’s betrayal, no rationale for his actions. (Unlike the second century Gnostic fiction “The Gospel of Judas” which is in the news at the moment, in which Judas is presented as Jesus’ obedient confidant simply carrying out his orders as Jesus rigs the entire passion to fulfil his preordained scheme.) In the scriptural gospels sin is and remains a mystery that resists all rationalization. But there are hints. Human beings are afraid to trust, and in our fear we try to control events and manipulate other people. We try to force the outcome of events and control our relationships so that we don’t have to let go or wait or hope. Judas seems to have been driven by a need to control events. He was used to controlling the finances of the disciples. He hated it when Mary wasted on Jesus an entire flask of expensive ointment that could have been sold and the money transferred to Judas’ budget under the social outreach to the poor column. When the time came for Jesus to be triumphant in Jerusalem and bring in his kingdom, Judas must have become very nervous and angry. In spite of the demonstration in the temple there were no signs that Jesus was taking control in the capital. Judas must have been beside himself with frustration that nothing was being done to bring about the final confrontation that would lead to God’s spectacular vindication of Jesus as the Messiah. So be it. If no else would take control of events,

Judas would. He would be the mover and the shaker by ensuring that the authorities took action. He would broker the final confrontation. He would seize hold of the lever of history and open the final act, which would lead to God's enthronement of his Messiah.

Judas makes a kiss the sign. We are so sure that our control is for the other's good. Judas kisses Jesus, as if to say. "Jesus, my friend, you will thank me for this. You'll soon see that is for the best, in spite of how it appears. In a little while, after a legion of angels has come from God to install you as Messiah, you'll look back and say, 'Judas, you took me by surprise but it all worked out. Things just needed a man of action to stir things up.'" But all Judas' manipulation and scheming does is to trigger the mechanisms of violence and scapegoating and ensure that the authorities can crush Jesus as an opponent to be sacrificed. Judas' wishful fantasy born of his inability to trust crashed down in an instance and he has only one way out of the pain—suicide. His violence against himself holds up a terrible mirror to human brokenness. Our disease of fear and mistrust tells us that we struggle with two seeming alternatives in life. We feel that not being in control will be the death of us. We need to use mastery and force or we won't exist. As soon as Judas realizes the utter futility of his scheming and forcing, he doesn't have a life, he has become nothing. He has identified with the need to control. When that is shattered, he is already dead. The noose and the tree are the means just to finish the process of becoming nothing.

And then there is Peter. Peter holds up to us a mirror to the other dimension of our brokenness—our fear of being in relationship, our fear of being connected with and responsible for our fellow human beings. Peter does not betray Jesus like Judas. Instead he denies his relationship with him. Denial. We use the word a lot in modern America. .

Denial has two levels. First, it refers to our extraordinary capacity to repress the truth from our consciousness. We stuff our feelings deep down so we don't have to pay them any attention. We refuse to see, to acknowledge, to accept the reality around us if it conflicts with our image of ourselves and others, if it doesn't fit the script we are sticking to. We lie to ourselves and others about our relationships. We pretend. We fake. Lying becomes not just an occasional activity. It becomes a state of mind. We don't just occasionally deny the truth. We are, as we say, *in denial*.

If denial is lying it is also repudiating, disconnecting. In denying our real relationship with others we cut ourselves off from them. In denying that we belong together with someone, we sever ourselves. Peter is afraid of the consequences of belonging to Jesus. It is safer to claim to be separate, to have no relationship. He denies his relationship with Jesus three times. John doesn't tell us that Peter wept afterwards as the other gospels do. Perhaps we are meant to let our own tears fill our eyes as we look at ourselves in the mirror. We are afraid to be connected with Jesus as we are afraid to be connected with our fellow human beings. Ultimately, we fear that the two are one and the same thing. We want the security of slipping back into the safety of our individuality. We are terrified of solidarity and community as a way of being. We want its advantages when it suits us, and we want to be rid of it when it threatens us with suffering or responsibility.

After the resurrection, Jesus will give Peter the opportunity to reweave his connectedness, inviting him three times to renew his love and embrace of our relatedness. “Simon, son of John, do you love me? Tend my sheep.” (John 21:15-17) Jesus who is the way, the truth, and the life, will guide Peter back from the lies of denial to the truth of our connection with each other and our responsibility to nourish and tend each other. To live in relationship is not to be a saint, it is simply accepting the truth of our being.

To deny this truth of our interrelatedness in God is nothing other than to hate life itself, to hate our own life, because life consists of this web of being and communion. Denial like control is hostility against ourselves. The death of Jesus shows us what we do to ourselves and to one another when we are like this. Trust and communion or death. These are the choices.

“Is it nothing unto you?” Today, we look into the Passion as into a mirror, and see how God is the victim of our own self-destructiveness. God suffers in the death of his Son the violence we do to ourselves.

John’s recounting of Jesus’ passion ends with the cry, “It is finished.” And we are asked to consider what that means for ourselves. Because nothing has happened. *Tetelestai*—it is consummated, completed. What astonishing irony? Was there anything apparently less finished than this story? Jesus’ corpse hanging on the cross leaves the passers by who knew him totally hanging in the air! Jesus dies claiming that God has in fact had the last word. But God is utterly silent on the cross. There is not the slightest sign of God’s presence. No miracle. No spirit like a dove descending. No supernatural light of transfiguration. No voice from heaven. Deafening silence.

Nothing has happened to force our faith. The silence of God on the cross leaves room for our free response. If we don’t see the secret that is being revealed here, we never will see it anywhere. The evangelist will only hint at the secret, which we have to consider in order to unlock it. “I thirst.” Of course, any victim of crucifixion suffers the agony of dehydration. But there is more to this thirst. This is the thirst of God for oneness with us. It is the wanting to be of God in our lives. It is the desire of God for each of us. ‘And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.” (John 12:32, 33) Jesus’ only power is the power to attract. He can’t force or manipulate without denying his very being.

If “there is no sorrow like unto his sorrow” it is because Christ on the cross is God suffering our refusal to be loved, our withdrawal into ourselves from our union with God. But it is precisely because there is no sorrow like unto his sorrow, that there is no joy like his joy either. Each one of us can consummate the joy of God today by saying yes to his yearning for us. It is because of the appalling freedom that God gives us to say no, that our yes has such astonishing resonance. The yes that each of us can pronounce in our hearts today to the love of God in Christ resounds in the heart of God as music. There is nothing that God desires more than to hear our yes, and no greater joy that God can be given. It is a yes that need not be shouted or forced. It can be almost silent. It might be

only the stretching out of our hands to receive the Body and Blood of Christ which is given for us. It is enough.