

Good Friday Sermon  
Michael Battle  
Trinity Church Boston  
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There is a play by Jean-Paul Sartre called *The Living Dead*. In French, the *Unburied Dead*. The story takes place in France during the Second World War. In the attic are six captive prisoners, members of the resistance. It is night, and the next morning each prisoner, one at a time, will be tortured for information. They are ignorant of any such information, so they need summon no courage. They are “dead in the water” so to speak, nothing to do but wait, suffer, and then die.

Suddenly, the attic door opens. Someone else is thrown among the prisoners making them seven now. The stranger turns out to be the leader of the resistance movement, but the Nazi soldiers who threw him in did not realize this. They think he is an unlucky soul caught in the wrong place at the wrong time after curfew, who will probably be detained for the night and released in the morning.

Now the other prisoners are in a different existential reality. They are no longer dead in the water, no longer passive in the face of death. They now have an active role to play in what awaits them. They tell the resistance leader, “Don't worry. We will hold our tongues.”

He begins to say, “I thank you, for myself, for the Resistance, for France. Your courage and your sacrifice will not be forgotten.”

Suddenly, one of the others, his fiancée, says, “Oh, shut up. Nothing you have to say could possibly mean anything to us. I am not blaming you. It is not your fault. But the fact is that you are a living man and I am a dead woman, and the living and the dead have nothing to say to each other. Tomorrow you go out that door to freedom and life, and I go out it to torment and death, and that fact puts an impenetrable barrier between us. I do not hate or envy you. I simply do not see you as a meaningful part of my universe. Now go sit down over there and leave me to talk and hold hands with my brothers and sisters, the people with whom I shall be dying in a few hours.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *A GOOD FRIDAY MEDITATION ON AN UNLIKELY TEXT* Written by James Kiefer. Subject: A Good Friday meditation Date: Thu, 04 Apr 1996

Sartre's play, *The Living Dead*, and his theory of existentialism point to how in existing and acting a certain way we give meaning to our lives. For Sartre, there is no fixed design for how a human being should be and no God to give us meaning. I think there is something important that Sartre can teach people of Christian faith about this day of crucifixion that we call good.

The Gospel of John's perspective of Christ's Crucifixion makes more sense if you realize how Matthew, Mark and Luke are visualizing the scene. These other Gospels portray Jesus talking more on the cross and crying out in agony. The proverbial camera is squarely on Jesus. John, on the other hand, has the camera on those around Jesus. The only discourse from the cross for John is that Jesus tells the beloved disciple to care for others, and Jesus declares thirst and that Jesus says it is finished. In John's Gospel, there is nothing good about the cross. There is no centurion proclaiming the good news that Jesus is God's Son or that He is innocent. In John's Gospel, there are few words about the cross and more focus on silence and the actions of others, like the soldiers breaking people's legs and making fun of Jesus the cadaver by stabbing Him in the side.

John captures more of the foolishness of God on the cross which breaks down the barrier between God and us. St. Paul puts it this way: "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Corinthians 1.25).

Perhaps, many do not see such a foolishness to ever be infuriated at God. Instead, many of us sugar coat the cross, use it as decoration and forget it was the equivalent of an electric chair in first century Palestine. Perhaps, we are not as honest as the fiancée in Sartre's *The Living Dead*. Perhaps, we are not angry enough.

The cross, I do believe, provides reconciliation. But not the kind of reconciliation we often sugar coat.

Reconciliation is closely related to another key Christian virtue taught by the great judgment in Matthew 25- hospitality. All are to be received as Christ. But notice, the King in the parable of Matthew 25 goes on to say 'I was the stranger, and you took me in'. Christ is the stranger. This implies a deeper theology of hospitality than merely giving food and board to a passing visitor. In Jesus there

is an inclusiveness linked particularly to strangeness, or we might say 'otherness', in contrast to those who are 'like us'.

The deeper understanding of reconciliation as hospitality is the understanding that Christian disciples are not to be choosy about whom they keep company with. And those to whom Jesus trains us to be hospitable are nicely ambiguous and can be translated as 'stranger' as well as 'guest'. The former sense is reinforced by the reference to Matthew 25, 35.

But here is what is most difficult about this day —namely, not only are we called to be hospitable to strangers and guests, but we are also called to cherish the stranger and turn that strangeness into someone who, while different, we learn to value as closely as if we were cherishing God. Here is the tragedy on this day. We are not cherishing God. We are killing God.

Jesus, in some ways, contradicts the fiancée's anger that the living and the dead have nothing to say to each other because Jesus, who knew no sin became our sin. Perhaps, what the fiancée's envisions as life pales in comparison to what Jesus has in mind for us as life. And despite our groping for rationality, we are again in the realm of mystery, the mystery of what it cost God to redeem us.

The angry voice of the fiancée, however, still resounds, "Oh, shut up. Nothing you have to say could possibly mean anything to us." Many of you have already learned this in life experience, in broken marriages, with dying parents, of course the list can go on and on. So, before we get to Easter, let us heed the wisdom of another John--John of the Cross who advises, all words cease and we are left with faith.

Jesus' experience on the cross was, of course, utterly unique and unrepeatable, for he was taking into himself the sin of the world. Times of seeming desertion and absence and abandonment appear to be universal among those who have walked this path of faith before us. Let us hold their hands as we soldier on.