Westminster Presbyterian Church

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Was Ever a Death Like His?

Scripture Lesson: Matthew: 26:36-46

Educated Greco-Roman pagans would have been familiar with the death of Socrates described by Plato. . . . Admirers of Socrates react[ed] disparagingly toward the picture of Jesus distraught and troubled, throwing himself prostrate to earth and begging God to deliver him. We have an ancient example in Celsus, a learned pagan of ca. AD 170, who objected: “How can one who is divine mourn and lament and pray to escape the fear of death, expressing himself thus, ‘O Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me’? How could he have been deserted and handed over by his friends? If he foresaw that such things would happen to him, why did he not avoid them?”—Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*

In his anguish, Jesus prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.—Luke 22:44

Familiarity can sometimes breed, if not contempt, then at least a lack of understanding and appreciation. In our particular cultural moment, this happens to Christian teaching and the Christian story—to Jesus’ story. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve sat next to someone on an airplane, someone who hasn’t darkened the door of a church or opened a Bible in years, who nonetheless knows everything there is to know about it—and feels the need to tell me. (I know, I know, I’m supposed to witness . . . But how long, O Lord, how long? . . . I* should have just said that I “ do consulting work for a non-profit,” and left it at that). But it’s true for all of us—even if we go to church and read the Bible regularly, maybe especially if we do. It’s all become so familiar that we fail to understand and appreciate how strange—and perhaps how strangely beautiful—it all is.

That’s one good reason to study church history, to go back to the beginning and listen to those who objected to Christianity and even rejected it. Attending to their objections, attempting to answer them, can strengthen our faith, help us to understand and appreciate its strange beauty.

Take this coming week, for example, Holy Week. Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem (riding on a donkey, the crowd waving palm branches, shouting, “Hooray!—here is our king!”); the last supper (Jesus washing the disciples’ feet, breaking the bread and passing the cup, “this is my body broken for you, this is the cup of the new covenant sealed in my blood for the forgiveness of sins”); Jesus praying in anguish in the Garden at Gethsemane (“Father if it be your will, let this cup pass from me”); his arrest (Judas identifying him in the garden with a kiss—the kiss of death—and Jesus saying to him, “Friend, do what you are here to do.”); the sham trial, (“Shall I crucify your king?” Pilate taunts the crowd. “We have no king but Caesar! Crucify him! Crucify him!”); his suffering on the cross (“I thirst”); his cry, his prayer to God (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”); his death (“It is finished”).

It’s all so familiar—to us. But to those who heard it—read it—for the first time, not so. Take Celsus, for example. Celsus lived and wrote in the second half of the second century (around 160, 170, 180) when Christianity was beginning to spread in the Roman Empire. He was an educated man, a philosopher, a student of religions, and a critic of Christianity, most notably in his book, *On True Teaching*, which true teaching he believed to be in direct opposition to Christian teaching. We have a fair amount of that book because it’s been preserved in a rebuttal called *Against Celsus*, written by the Christian apologist Origen in the year, 250. That Origen would feel the need to answer Celsus some 70 years after his book was written, and to answer him in detail by quoting him at length, gives some indication of the influence and the appeal of Celsus’ criticisms: Celsus was by no means the only one saying what he said.

To appreciate what he was saying, you have to remember that Celsus was an educated man of his day, which meant he had read the philosophers, especially Plato, and that he looked to Socrates—the central figure in Plato's dialogues—as a kind of patron saint, a model, a paragon of how to live . . . and how to die.

"How to die," because they killed Socrates too. He too was found guilty of blasphemy and sedition, of undermining both religion and the state, and he too was sentenced to death for it. And those are hardly the only similarities between Jesus and Socrates: one trained as a carpenter, the other as a stone mason—yet neither practiced his trade, both responding to a higher calling—a mission—from God: to do God's work—that was their lives' work. Yet, in pursuing that work, neither wrote down a word of his own, leaving that task to followers—followers who, at times, seemed both deeply reverential towards, and thoroughly befuddled by, both their teacher and his teachings.

And it's in their teachings that the similarities are most striking:
"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." So Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

"Despite what the world says, we ought never to do wrong, not even when a wrong has been done to us, because to do evil is wrong." So Socrates speaking with his friend, Crito.

"My kingdom is not of this world. For this I was born and for this I came into the world: to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." So Jesus on trial before Pontius Pilate.

"Men of Athens, I honor you and love you, but I shall obey God rather than you; and while I have life and breath I shall never cease from my service to God, persuading all I meet to care most for wisdom and truth and the well-being of their souls." So Socrates on trial before an Athenian court.

I could go on with the similarities, but the differences are striking, too. Both saw human beings as needing redemption—in thrall to sin, or as Socrates put it, walking around this world disoriented, as if our souls were stuck upside down in our bodies. But unlike Jesus, Socrates did not identify himself as the means of that redemption, he could only awaken us to our need for it. In fact, at several points, Socrates says that only God come down to earth could save us from our sin, from ourselves; saying that if God were to come down to earth, that one, the righteous one, the one sent by God, the gift of God, would be as the only living one among the dead, the only true one among the flickering shadows. And indeed at one point, one of Socrates' conversation partners says that, if ever God were to come down to earth as the righteous one to save us, we human beings would no doubt whip him, torture him, and finally, after every extreme of suffering, crucify him. That written almost 400 years before Jesus' birth.

What was Plato but Moses speaking Greek?—so asked Clement of Alexandria (another early figure in church history), meaning that just as the Old Testament pre-figured, pointed toward, and prepared us for Jesus and our need for Jesus, even if its authors didn't know it . . . so also Plato, with his dialogues. *What was Plato but Moses speaking Greek?*

You can see why someone like Celsus would be intrigued. But if you think about it, you can also see why he was repulsed. Think about the way Jesus died. It's certainly not the way Socrates died.

The Death of Socrates—it's a famous painting by the 18th-century French painter Jacques-Louis David. In it, Socrates sits, reaching out to take his hemlock, his other arm raised, index finger pointing upward; he's surrounded by his closest friends and followers—his disciples—who, overcome by grief, turn away and bow their heads, unable now to hold back their tears. Even the jailer, who has come to know and love Socrates during his imprisonment, while handing him the cup, turns away in grief. Socrates alone is unperturbed—calm, serene, at peace with God and this world, and entirely assured of his soul's safe passage to the next.
The painting is drawn from a dialogue by Plato called *Phaedo*, which recounts Socrates' last day on earth. Athenian law stipulated that on that appointed day, the prisoner take his poison at sunset. So Socrates' closest friends and followers come to him early that day, for one last day with him, one last philosophical conversation.

They are joined unexpectedly, however, by two young, philosophically-minded out-of-towners, named Simmias and Cebes, who have never met Socrates before, and have arrived wanting to meet and to talk to him, not knowing that this will be his last day on earth. So as they all gather around him early that morning, Simmias speaks up first: "Socrates," he says, "this may not be the best time to bring it up, but as for the immortality of the soul . . . well, Cebes here and I don't really believe in it." You can imagine how Socrates' friends looked at them. But Socrates, ever the serene sage, welcomes them: "Please state your objections forthrightly, and do not hold back on my account, and perhaps in our discussion we can discover some measure of the truth about this subject—because (and here he laughs quietly) it is of some moment for me today." And off they go, on an all-day conversation.

Socrates listens to Simmias' and Cebes' objections, and answers them with no less than five related arguments to show the soul's immortality, and gradually they begin to be convinced. But, as the shadows begin to lengthen, he acknowledges that much more could—and should—be said on the subject. And so he tells them a story—gives them a kind of poetic-mythical map of the cosmos—tracing the journey of the soul from this life to the next, saying that, while no one would insist on the literal truth of this story , we will all be better—live better lives—if we believe something like it, believing that virtue and goodness and the state of our souls, both in this world and the next, is the only thing that really matters.

It's at this point, the shadows growing still longer, that the jailer comes back with the hemlock. Socrates, pointing upward, takes the cup, "very gently, without trembling or changing color or expression" (we're told). He even pauses to ask the jailer if there's enough for him to pour out a libation. Now to us, "libation" is a funny-fancy word for an alcoholic drink, but originally it meant an act of piety, of offering up the first drink, or the first part of the first drink, as an act of sacrifice, in thanksgiving to God. "No, Socrates," the jailer says, "there's just enough for you."

"I understand," Socrates says "but I may and must pray that my departure from here be a fortunate one; so I offer this prayer, that I fare well as I go from here—that my soul will be healed—through death, as I go that better, more beautiful world. May this, my prayer, be granted." And with these words, he raises the cup to his lips, "very cheerfully (we're told) and quietly drains it."

You have to admit that, as prayers go, it's a different kind of prayer than "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?". And that's not the only difference: Socrates died surrounded by his friends, and lamented by his adoring disciples; Jesus died abandoned, and denied by his sleepy, weak, and craven disciples. Socrates does not resist his death, accepting it as "the way God is leading"; Jesus prays to God three times for his cup to be taken from him. Socrates is serene and composed throughout; Jesus, praying in the Garden at Gethsemane, sweats blood.

I could go on with the differences, but you can see why Celsus was repulsed. Jesus' was not a good death, not a good way to die, certainly not the way a good human being, much less a sage, should die, and certainly not the way God's chosen, God's beloved son, should die. Not to mention that crucifixion is a particularly gruesome way to die. So Celsus.

Yet, I would argue that Jesus' death—as gruesome as it was, and it was gruesome—is also beautiful, strangely, divinely beautiful. And I'm not alone in this: in John's Gospel, Jesus' crucifixion is presented as the epitome of glory, glory being the highest manifestation of God's being and God's beauty.

So I disagree with Celsus. And, as is usual with such disagreements, in the end, it gets back to how we understand God. Origen quotes Celsus as saying this:
God is that which is beautiful and happy and exists within himself in the most perfect of all conceivable states. This means that God is changeless. A god who comes down to men undergoes change—a change from good to bad; from beautiful to shameful; from happiness to misfortune; from what is perfect to what is wicked. Now what sort of a god would choose a change like that?

Celsus asks a good question: from good to bad, from beautiful to shameful, from happiness to misfortune, from what is perfect to what is wicked—what sort of a god would choose a change like that? What sort of God would *"empty himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, humble*

himself, and become obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross." What sort of a god would choose that? It's a good question.

And it has a good answer: Only the sort of God who is truly beautiful and happy and exists in the most perfect of all conceivable states. Because at the heart of that most perfect state—perhaps the most perfect part of that most perfect state and therefore the hardest for us to conceive (have sympathy for Celsus)—is God's perfect love. A perfect love that not only overflows to make and sustain all creation, but also, when the supposedly highest part of that creation rebelled against God, trying to be God and thereupon suffering the consequences of that rebellion—namely, sin and death—that God, in perfect love, would come down to us, become one of us, take that sin and death upon himself to save us from it, to save us from ourselves, to redeem us. In other words, the libation, the sacrifice poured out for us, *is* Jesus. And that's why his death is at once so gruesome and so strangely beautiful.

"Was ever grief like mine?"—that's the title and the refrain of a poem by the 17th-century English pastor, poet, and hymn-writer, George Herbert. The poem has Jesus asking that question, from the cross, again and again. Again and again and again. With every stanza, he recounts another event of the past week, the one we call Holy Week, another grief, another grief, and then another, each stanza ending with the question: "Was ever grief like mine?"

For fifty-two stanzas. As you read it, especially if you read it aloud, it's almost unbearable. *Was ever grief like mine? Was ever grief like mine? Was ever grief like mine?* Until you want to scream, "No! No! No! God, no! Make it stop—please! Only it doesn't: it's relentless, unvarying. Until the fifty-third stanza, when we get this:

But, O my God, my God! why leav'st thou me,
the son in whom thou dost delight to be?
My God, my God————————

but the rest of Jesus' cry, the "why hast thou forsaken me?" goes unstated, replaced instead by this: *"Never was grief like mine."*

The question "was ever grief like mine?" has now become a statement, "Never was grief like mine." It's the one thing Jesus knows, the only thing that he knows in that moment: that grief, that unspeakable grief, that is separation form God.

The price of our sin, the death that our sin brings, is separation from God. God is, as Socrates said (what was Plato but Moses speaking Greek?), God is the source of all life, of our life, is life itself. And now Jesus on the cross, feels our separation from that life. The only innocent one, the only one without sin, pays the price of that sin—pays the price for all sin, for our sin, for all our sin. Never was grief like his.

Then back to the pattern for eight more stanzas until the sixty-second and final stanza:
But now I die; now all is finished.
My woe is man's wellness: and now bow my head.
Only let others say, when I am dead,
Never was grief like mine.

Never was grief like his. We should say that. And we should say this too: *Never, never was death like his*. And never would it be again

Socrates was a human being—great, but still only human—who died a beautiful human death, at least as beautiful as a human death can be. Beautiful, but one that others could—and have tried to—emulate. Jesus was and is God become human, fully God and fully human, who died a beautiful, divine, and inhuman death for us, once and for all, so that we might be saved from sin and death, and never die, but live in our whole beings, soul and body, with God, life itself, forever.

Never was death like his.

Amen.