

**NIGHT WORLD; JOHN 18:1-19:42; APRIL 10, 2009 – GOOD FRIDAY;
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The service of Tenebrae dates to the Middle Ages when Christians first remembered the crucifixion of Jesus by reading Scripture and extinguishing lights much as we do tonight. Even though Jesus was nailed to the cross at nine in the morning, at noon, say each of the Gospels, darkness covered the land until his death at three.

When evening came he was taken down from the cross by Joseph of Arimathea and, some say, Nicodemus, the religious leader who came to Jesus with searching questions under the cover of darkness.

Finally, they took Jesus to the tomb Joseph of Arimathea had purchased and prepared. He was placed gently, lovingly in his grave clothes on the sarcophagus and when the great stone was rolled across the entrance he lay in the still darkness of the grave.

If the Gospel writers are Jewish portrait artists as Bishop Spong said recently, then this portrait they offer of Jesus increasingly shrouded and at last enveloped by darkness depends on the hues of evening and the black of night.

There is something powerful about the night, about evening, about darkness. The Museum of Modern Art held an exhibit this winter entitled, “Vincent Van Gogh and the Colors of the Night.” It was the first time all of the nocturnal paintings of Van Gogh had been gathered for display.

Clearly, Van Gogh was as fascinated with night as with day. His study of *The Sower*, for example, depicts a man at dusk scattering seed across a freshly plowed field. The process of taking root, germination and growth occurs, says Van Gogh, in the dark of night, a time of renewal and rebirth.

And this is strikingly similar to something Jesus tells us in the Gospel of John. He says, “In very truth I tell you, a grain of wheat remains a solitary grain unless it falls into the ground and dies; but if it dies it bears a rich harvest.”

The operative phrase here is “falls into the ground and dies” which is precisely what is to happen to Jesus in the hours following his trial and crucifixion.

When Jesus uttered these words he foretold his followers of his coming death. “What shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No,” he responds, “it was for this very reason I came to this hour.”

Yet, this journey into darkness concerns not just Jesus but all of his followers, as the signs of the martyrs across our chancel arch remind us. Christ’s own experience crucified, buried and risen to new life is to be repeated by each generation, by you and me.

You see, I would like to suggest tonight that we approach Good Friday not just as a moment of betrayal and emptiness but also as a time of regeneration. The events of this day are not only about humanity at its worst but humanity at its best which is why we call this Friday ‘good’.

The question is how to reconcile the two? What makes this night of betrayal a night of regeneration?

Again Van Gogh is revealing. If his *Sower* represents the fecundity of night, his *Night Café* represents, as he said, “a place where one can ruin oneself, go mad or commit a crime. I have tried to express,” he said in a letter to his brother Theo, “the power of darkness in a public house by soft greens, and all this in an atmosphere like a devil’s furnace, of pale sulfur.”ⁱ

No one can say Van Gogh saw the world through rose colored glasses. He was acutely aware of the struggle to survive the poverty and injustice in this world for peasants and prostitutes and the working class.

In fact, one commentator says what gave Van Gogh his ability to paint such scenes and people is the fact that he himself was part of that strange, “banquet for the poor, the lame, and the blind.” He painted the *Night Café* without romanticizing either the people or hardness of life in it.ⁱⁱ

What reconciles the two darknesses we are talking about? What is the bridge between them? The bridge between these two realms is surrender. Just as Van Gogh gave himself to the people and struggle of life he depicted we are reminded of Jesus who did the same.

In Jesus’ journey from Galilee to Jerusalem and the cross there is a profound resignation. Each step along the way, he surrenders more deeply telling his disciples where his path leads, suggesting that his path will become their path. The closer they get the more he refers to them giving their lives away.

The other way to say this, and he did, is that “unless a seed fall into the ground and dies” it will bear no fruit. In that simple metaphor Jesus conveys the truth that his way of life is the way of physical sacrifice, yet not just sacrifice, but sacrifice that bears the fruit of transformation.

I want to highlight this ‘bridge’ as I’m calling it between the darkness of violence and the night of renewal; it is the key to an authentic faith; the sure way of a vital congregation.

One commentator says that the Christian life is, by definition, having one’s body, one’s daily habits formed in such a way that the worship of God is unavoidable. The goal of my daily routine said Calvin and many after him is to conduct every act I take, no matter how small, in such a way as to glorify God.

This sounds like spiritual talk but nothing could be more grounded. I make thousands of decisions a day. The challenge and creativity of following Jesus is to make these decisions in ways give flesh to my faith.

Daniel Berrigan put it more pungently, he said, “It all comes down to this: whose flesh are you touching and why? Whose flesh are you recoiling from and why? Whose flesh are you burning and why?”ⁱⁱⁱ

Seeing our bodies as the medium for our faith gets below the radar of the intellect where we debate God under the illusion that we’re exercising our faith.

I’m not suggesting ignoring our minds. I am saying any use of our minds that does not have consequences for our body – where we go, what we do, who we relate to – isn’t worth our time. There’s lots of talk about church decline today which corresponds to the rise in popularity of yoga studios. My hunch is there is something appealing about

focusing on the body as a means for physical and spiritual wholeness that the church does not offer.

In our iPod, virtual world culture there is hunger for intimacy, for community, for authentic human contact. A spirituality of incarnation focused on the tangible outcomes of our faith in daily living, from the products we use and consume to the people we do or don't spend time with might rearrange our priorities and patterns of life.

This "practice of incarnation" – the surrender and resignation of Jesus' life and the lives of his followers – is the means by which God transforms the realm of violence into the night of renewal and regeneration. Those whose intellectual assent has become as dry as dust, those who are dying to know more God in their bodies are saved.

In a world of body counts from war zones to domestic shootings and an age when sexual orientation is beginning to find freedom of expression a theology that does not ignore but makes central the role of the body is essential if the church is to have anything at all of relevance to say.

Someone said a few years ago that artists are the theologians of our world. Paul Celan the German poet whose parents taken by the Nazis from their home when he was a teenager and out for the evening, never to appear again, spent his life, surrendered his life giving voice, giving body in his poetry to those who disappeared in the Holocaust.

In a simple poem entitled, *Tenebrae*, he says the participants of a service such as this are embodied in the very events of the Cross with Christ and one another.

Worshippers and Christ surrendering to the tenebrae or darkness of violence, falling to the ground and dying, to bear fruit as Jesus said.

Tenebrae^{iv}

Nigh are we, Lord,
near and graspable.

Gripped already, Lord,
in each other clutched, as though
the body of each of us were
your body, Lord.

Pray, Lord,
Pray to us,
we are nigh.

Windskew we went on,
we went only, to bend ourselves
at hollow and hole.

To the trough we went, Lord.

It was blood, it was,
which you had spilt, Lord.

It glittered.

It cast your image into our eyes,
Lord.

Eyes and mouth hang so open and
empty Lord.

We *have* drunk, Lord.

The blood and the image within the
blood, Lord.

Pray, Lord.
We are nigh.

The seed that has fallen into the ground and died cannot see in the darkness that surrounds it, but the forces of creation which split it open and feed its tiny shoots are at work. So in the darkness where Jesus lay and where the lives of his followers have been laid down in faithful surrender – the miracle of resurrection awaits. Amen.

ⁱ Cliff Edwards, *Mystery of the Night Café: Hidden Key to the Spirituality of Vincent Van Gogh*, publication galley, 2007. 68.

ⁱⁱ Edwards, 70.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Our bodies, our faith," *The Christian Century*, January 27, 2009. 24ff.

^{iv} Paul Celan, *Selections*, edited by Pierre Joris (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 61.