

CLINGING

Philippians 4: 1-13

[Wednesday in Holy Week, 8 April 2009, Augsburg College Chapel]

Grace and peace to you during these most holy days as we keep vigil together in the passion of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

It was early on a Saturday afternoon ten years ago when the call came from the hospital staff with an urgent request that I come quickly. My parishioner, Burl, in the hospital for some routine surgery, whom I had visited a couple of times in the previous week, had taken a turn for the worse and the family asked that I come right away. I drove the 30 miles to the hospital imagining that I would find Burl and his family considering various treatment alternatives. Instead I was ushered into a family waiting room, where Nora, Burl's wife of 50 years, and the rest of the family were gathered, waiting for me to arrive. I saw it in their faces before Nora told me that Burl had developed a blood clot and had died suddenly a few minutes earlier. And then Nora fell into my arms, sobbing, clinging to me with an intensity that I will never forget. Clinging to her pastor, to her friend, to another human being, with a longing for comfort, for explanation, for peace that passes our understanding, for the most basic human need – to be in touch, for the connection, for the assurance of the promise of life that goes on despite the pain and sadness.

I imagine we've all had this sort of experience. Perhaps with a child, about to be left for the first time at school, clinging to her parent with a longing that breaks your heart. Or maybe it's with a boy or girl friend about to depart for a semester away, and you cling to each other and to the feeling that your relationship will survive the separation. Or maybe it's with a parent who must leave – something has happened in the marriage that you struggle to understand – and you are clinging to know that all will be well.

This is the stuff of Holy Week, the very real, concrete, physical nature of our human longing for explanation, for comfort, for peace, for being in touch – clinging with all of our might to this Jesus who enters Jerusalem to great acclaim and who now faces his own very real, physical passion – longing with all of our being for words of peace and comfort – in the midst of this confusing, frightening turn of events that leads to a cross, to a tomb, and to the remarkable promise of life abundant. How is this possible? I need you so much, Lord Jesus. I cling to you and to your promises and yet life happens. Will you keep your promises? Will I be able to go on in the midst

of the world's cruelty and darkness? "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus cries, and we cling to his every breath, his final breath, to help us make sense of our lives. We cling for dear life.

How do we understand this longing, the deep emotion of clinging to someone or something, holding on for dear life? The Apostle Paul, writing to the faithful at Philippi some fifty years after the death and resurrection of Christ, offers one answer. His is a deeply personal appeal to hold firm to all that is true and honorable and just and pure – pleasing, commendable, excellence, praiseworthy – for in these things, he says, we shall find the peace of God, the peace that surpasses all understanding, that keeps us safe in Christ Jesus. "I can do all things through him who strengthens me," Paul proclaims. I cling to the Lord Jesus Christ who is near to me, who guards my heart and mind, in whose path we know all that is good and true in the world.

Our ancestor, Martin Luther, found the idea of "clinging" to something or someone central to his understanding of human nature. "Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God," Luther writes. So what or who are you clinging to? Are you clinging to the ways of the world? To those who deny that they know this man? Or are you clinging to the One who has died for our sins, whose death and resurrection are the source of our faith that justifies so that we might live as God's called people in the world? Some Luther translators substitute "trust" for "clinging" in his writings but several commentators suggest that the physicality of the practice of "clinging" to something or someone is more true to Luther's theology. And it is where we find ourselves in this most holy of weeks, clinging to this man, Jesus, whom God sent into the world to save us from ourselves.

This concrete, physical character of clinging strikes me as so important to our lives of faith in the world. All that is true and beautiful and pure and just cannot exist simply in lofty ideas or aspirations. What our heart clings to and confides in is not some abstract philosophical concept. It is this human being next to me, this Lord who is near, this body that I wrap my arms around in an act of love. A constant companion in my life of faith, Kentucky farmer and writer, Wendell Berry, gets it just right in his essay, "Word and Flesh," where he writes that "Love is never abstract. It does not adhere to the universe or the planet or the nation or the institution or the profession, but to the singular sparrows of the street, the lilies of the field." Instead, this love we cling to must be incarnate, it must be flesh so that we can touch it, embrace it, cling to it, hang on for dear life.

And here we are, in the midst of this holy week, clinging to this Jesus whose passion redeems us. God is incarnate, dwelling in our midst, active in human history. Love is never abstract. It is this man in whose life and passion we know all that is good and true and beautiful. It is Nora clinging to me as she struggles to accept that her beloved Burl has died unexpectedly. It is my daughter, my friend, my father – clinging, hanging on for dear life, so that they might find the peace, the comfort, the explanation, the connection that makes sense of our lives in the world.

The 16th century Christian mystic, Teresa of Avila, offers these words of inspiration for the lives of those who cling to each other:

Christ has no body now but yours
No hands, no feet on earth but yours
Yours are the eyes through which He looks
compassion on this world
Christ has no body now on earth but yours

We, my friends, are the body of Christ on earth now. We cling to each other, God's faithful people in this time, full of grace and truth and hope and love. I cling to you, Lord Jesus. I cling to you, my brothers and sisters in Christ. We are the body of Christ on earth now and love is ours in this body – on the cross, in the depths of hell, in the tomb, in life eternal and abundant – and here also in this community of faith and learning where we seek together to know God's will for our lives. We cling to you, Lord Jesus. We keep vigil in your passion. May God bless us in our journey together, clinging to each other so that we might know very soon the Easter joy that awaits us. All praise to God. Amen.