

Holy Week:
An Invitation to Walk with Christ

Ruth Haley Barton

“It is not the act of a good disciple to flee from the cross in order to enjoy an easy piety.”
St. John of the Cross

Two years ago during this season, my family gathered to bury my grandmother. She was 92 years old and greatly loved by many. On Saturday we came together around her casket to see her body one last time, to pray, and say our personal good-byes. On Sunday, we gathered at a small church across from her home to worship and celebrate her life in a more public and formal way. And then on Monday, a few of us made the journey three hours south for her burial.

At one point, I considered going home on Sunday after the funeral because that would have been more convenient. But there was another desire within me, the desire to go the whole way—with my Dad as he walked the path of saying good-bye to his mother and with my grandmother as her body was brought to its final resting place. Even though I knew she was no longer with us in the body, there was something about being present with her body up to and through those final moments that seemed important.

You see, when my grandmother was alive her greatest delight was to have her family around her. When it came time for us to leave, she would always stand on the porch and wave to us, straining for one last glimpse as we disappeared down the street. In fact, the picture that we as grandchildren were given on the day of her funeral was a picture of her waving good-bye from her front porch; it captured something of her heart and her spirit. And so I imagined that maybe on the day of her burial she would see us standing on the porch of this life, straining for one last connection with her before she

disappeared from our sight. It seemed like it was something we could do to honor her faithful love for us through the years.

It is this spirit that draws us to walk with Christ as we enter into this Holy Week. It is the desire to stay with a loved one for as long as our presence can bring them comfort and reassurance. It is the commitment not to leave them alone as the darkness deepens and also to be there waiting when the light dawns again. As Kathleen Norris has noted, this is the week Christians give themselves most fully and completely to worship. And it is a privilege. It is a privilege to walk with Christ and to worship him during this most holy week of the Christian Church.

The Gift of Presence

The dark night of Jesus' betrayal and execution began, ironically, with the kiss of a friend. The irony had to do with the fact that Jesus had given such priority to cultivating relationships with his disciples during his brief time here on earth and now this betrayal was taking place within that most intimate circle.

Some of Jesus' most human moments had to do with his poignant expressions of longing for companionship. From the very first moment of his life in ministry he invited "those whom he wanted...to be with him," the Scriptures say in Mark 3. He accepted his ultimate aloneness as we all must, but his longing for intimacy and friendship with those he loved expressed itself in different ways throughout his life.

When his teaching became too challenging and many chose to leave, Jesus turned to his disciples and said, "Will you leave me also?" As their relationships deepened, Jesus said, "I no longer call you servants, I call you friends." And one of the crowning achievements of his life was that he loved his own until the end. (John 13:1)

Perhaps the most compelling expression of Christ's longing for companionship was his request for his disciples to accompany him to the Garden of Gethsemane and to pray with him through the dark night of his betrayal and death. (Matthew 26: 36-37)

There was something about knowing that his friends were nearby that was a strength and a comfort. He invited Peter, James and John, whom he had come to trust the most, to come farther than the others. And as he began to grieve more openly and to struggle with what was before him, he asked them specifically to stay awake with him. He must have known how hard it is to stay awake and present to someone else's pain but he asked them anyway. He knew the human tendency to "check out" when the human struggle becomes too much to bear. Only those who are closest stay through the end.

Going all the Way

Every year at this time, we have the opportunity to "go all the way" in reliving the events of Jesus' last days here on this earth. Like the first disciples, we have the opportunity to choose, as best we can, to deepen our friendship with Christ by communing with him and learning from him as we walk each step of the way—from the triumph of Palm Sunday to the darkness and death of the crucifixion to the victory of the Resurrection. As we are intentional about seeking ways to walk with Christ through the events of this week, we respond to his deep and consistent desire to be with those he loved—*particularly during the time of his agony*. This is an act of love and friendship with Christ. It is the gift of staying present with him during the hardest and most unnerving part of his journey because he has asked us to remain near him, awake and alert. It is the gift of ourselves, which is the truest gift we have to give.

The invitation to walk with Christ through the events of Holy Week is a challenging invitation, to be sure, for it is an invitation to learn how to be like Christ, not

just during the triumphs of Palm Sunday-type experiences when everything is as we hoped it would be. It is easy to follow Christ then—to enjoy the pomp and circumstance, the good will and limelight. It is much harder to stay faithful to living with Christ and learning to be like Christ in the midst of betrayal, violence, pain, struggle, and death. There is a part of us that shrinks from this part of the journey, preferring to skip right to the Resurrection! As Barbara Brown Taylor commented, tongue-in-cheek, “I want to stop about a day short of following Jesus all the way.”

But the truth is that there are things that we learn by walking this path that we cannot learn in any other way. Some of them are things we do not necessarily want to hear and so they are best taught by Christ himself as we walk the path together. Let us pray together as we enter this Holy Week...

*Almighty God, whose most dear Son
went not up to joy but first he suffered pain,
and entered not into glory before he was crucified:
Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross,
may find it none other than the way of life and peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen*

Book of Common Prayer

Practice

Many of us have walked with a friend or a loved one through the last moments of their life and then their death. At the beginning of this Holy Week, take a few moments to remember what that journey was like. Reflect on what meant the most to them and to you.

With that in mind, think about the events leading up to and through Christ’s death and burial and listen for Jesus’ invitation for you to walk with him, staying awake and alert to the lessons he has to teach. How will you be present with Christ as we walk through each

one of these events? How might you orient your life this week to worshipping Christ in all facets of his journey to the cross? *Love so amazing, so divine, demands my heart, my life, my all.*

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