

Today/tonight, we take one last look at the ancient hymn *O Love, How Deep* and the love of God before us on the cross. Over the past six weeks, the Wednesday midweek services have walked us through the first five verses of the hymn we just finished singing. We've been reminded that Jesus came Himself, not sending another. He took on our flesh, to work and endure in our place and experience the pains of this life for our sake.

The central message of this hymn has been the truth that throughout His life and ministry, Jesus was at work *for us*. Everything He did, He did for you. His incarnation and birth, His Baptism and bloody sweat, His betrayal and rejection, and now—even now—His very death on the beloved, shameful cross is for you. As we heard in the hymn: For us by wickedness betrayed, / For us, in crown of thorns arrayed, / He bore the shameful cross and death; / For us He gave His dying breath.

Listen again to how the apostle John records that moment, Jesus' dying breath for us, **“So the soldiers did these things, but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son!’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother!’ And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), ‘I thirst.’ A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to His mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, ‘It is finished,’ and He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.”** (*John 19:25–30*)

How do you picture this scene? Go ahead, try to visualize this moment. Close your eyes, and imagine this spectacle in your mind's eye. Imagine this sight where Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Son of Mary, is suspended on the cross, dying, saying with His last breath, *tetelestai*, or in English, **“It is finished.”** [*Brief pause.*] That completion, that finishing, that fulfillment was the pivotal point in the history of the world. It was at that point when God's divine plan for us and for our salvation came to a culmination. *Tetelestai*: **“It is finished.”**

If you've not already, go ahead and open your eyes. Were able to you place yourself there? Did you find yourself as an outside observer or were you grouped among His family and friends? Honestly, it can be a struggle to wrap our minds around this pivotal point. For this reason, many movies, shows, paintings, etc. have attempted to help us picture this morbid moment. Some of us may have a specific painting burned into our memory. Maybe some of us squirm at just the mentioning of *The Passion of The Christ*. Perhaps many of us are anticipating how *The Chosen* will depict this moment. Works of art, like these can be very helpful in allowing us to witness what this moment might have been like.

A couple of months ago, I realized that most of the ways I've imagined this scene kept me at a safe distance from the weightiness of this moment. Yes, even when I saw, *The Passion of The Christ*, while it was very difficult and moving, it was still possible for me to feel removed from all the gory and gruesome action. Truth be told, as I watched that film, I was probably trying to remind myself that this was a movie attempting to keep some distance from the agony I witnessed. Certainly, some of this distance is natural as we live many years removed from this event in history.

But this past February, I experienced something quite different when it came to Jesus' crucifixion. Several members of Emmanuel's staff, including myself, went to a conference in Arizona. While in Arizona for that conference, we also had a chance to go to the *Chapel of the Holy Cross* in Sedona. The chapel itself is stunning to see. Built into the red rock landscape, this chapel is a unique sight. However, what was even more moving, was what was on the inside.

Inside this chapel, was a thirty-three-foot bronze statue of Jesus on the cross. To give you some perspective of that statue's size in this space, the top of the piece of this pulpit that is right above me is approximately thirty-three feet high. So, in a sanctuary far smaller than what we have here at Emmanuel, towered this pulpit-sized corpus of Christ on the cross. As you might imagine, walking into that space, the Crucified Christ was inescapable. Unlike my other experiences with the crucifixion, this one immediately shrunk the comfortable distance that I typically kept in my personal reflections.

And after sitting in the chapel for a little bit, I noticed other visitors moving towards the front left-side of the chapel and pausing. After watching several people go up, I figured out that there was a specific spot that people were seeking to stand in and view this statue from a distinct perspective. I also went up to this spot and what I found was this square plaque with footprints in it. I realized that this was where the others had been standing. When I stood there and looked up, the eyes of this Jesus statue were directly on me. In that moment, any comfortable distance I had kept in the past when considering Jesus' dying breath was now gone. In that moment, I wasn't an outside observer, no it was way more personal. In that moment, it was like everything and everyone else around faded away – it was just Jesus and me.

This week, as I was thinking about that experience, I wanted to see what the other staff members from Emmanuel experienced. I got to talk with most of the group that went, and the actual emotions and feelings varied. To some this was an unsettling experience, to others it was deeply comforting, for all of them it was intensely intimate and personal. As I heard their responses, I recognized two distinct reactions. This Jesus statue either evoked a “because of me feeling”

or a “for me feeling”. The “because of me feeling” stemmed from the guilt and shame that our sins were why Christ had to die. The “for me feeling” flowed from the peace and mercy that Christ willingly endured this punishment for our sake.

To me, both experiences I heard shared were relatable and valid; and both were overwhelming. Personally, I found myself dealing more with the “because of me feeling”. As I tried to meet that intense stare without looking away, I found myself posing this question on Jesus’ behalf, “How could you do this to me?” But as I continued to ponder that gaze, as unsettling and challenging as it was to meet, that gaze wasn’t as accusatory as my sinful self wanted me to believe. Those concentrated eyes, that seemed to see right into my soul, weren’t filled with anger but were filled with purpose carrying out the mission of salvation for each person until it was finished.

These experiences reveal how difficult it is for us to imagine this self-giving love. Why do we so often question this sacrifice of the ages? This entire sermon series has been proclaiming the essence of God is love and mercy, yet when we get to this point faced with Jesus’ death, we doubt. His death, His giving up of His spirit, is the greatest act of love there has ever been. This love is not mere sentimentality. It is not a feeling that comes and goes, that passes with the whim of our emotions. No, this love—this *agape*—this selfless, unconditional love is wholly unlike any other love that the world has ever known. But it’s hard not to hear the question, “is this really for me?”

Even when we get glimpses of it from time to time: the love of a mother for her infant child, the bond of friendship between soldiers at war, the love of a husband and wife after fifty years or more of marriage. All of these are images, echoes, if you will, of the love that Jesus has given and shown to us on the cross. Or, as Jesus Himself said, “**Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends**” (John 15:13). Despite these echoes, we still believe so easily that God’s love on the cross is too good to be true.

Our struggle might be because this sacrifice is so foreign to us. We live in an age where sacrifice is behind the times, where the notion of giving something up is almost laughable. Why should I have to sacrifice any part of my life for you or anyone else? A question that so often gets to the core of why so many of our relationships have been broken and destroyed.

However, the notion of self-sacrifice for the sake of someone else was built into us in creation. God made us to live and give of ourselves for the good of the world and everyone around us. And when we lost that impulse, that drive to *be there* for someone else no matter what, we lost the very essence of what it means to be human and the very essence of what it means to be divine.

Thanks be to God, Jesus, the one who is both God and man, both divine and human, brings us back together. He is the one who connects God and man as one. And that reconnection, that reconciliation between God and man, well, it came at a terrible price. And so, we wrestle in this tension between the “because of me” and “for me” feelings.

Jesus, the very Word made flesh, who breathed life into all things, that Jesus, He breathed His last breath. It is as if the world stopped, and everything that was uncertain and unclear suddenly came into sharp focus. We can hardly imagine such a time, such a moment. But here it is, right before our very eyes.

How will you meditate on this moment? Will you resolve to do better? Will you make God a promise that this time you really mean it? Is there something you can do that can ease the tension that is experienced on this Good Friday? He knows that there is nothing you can do, nothing you can even offer Him that is even close to the worth of His holy, precious blood and innocent suffering and death. All that you can offer only increases the tension.

Dear disciples whom Jesus loves, let’s lay aside our attempts at I.O.U’s or elaborate repayment plans that’s not the meditation this moment needs. Rather, receive what your Savior gives. For you are a disciple whom Jesus loves even as He went through dying on the cross. Like John, the disciple whom Jesus loved in our text, your Savior Jesus sees and loves you. And in this moment, He gives you a purpose, like He did for John. As John was given Mary to serve, so too, Jesus has given you others to serve. Even on this Good Friday, Jesus points you beyond yourself to those around you, behold your husband or wife, behold your son or daughter, behold your mom or dad, behold your friend or relative, behold your classmate or coworker, behold your boss or teacher, behold your pew mate or neighbor.

Behold, Jesus breathed His last on the cross so that you may *be* and *live* and *serve*. You are His own, His beloved, His precious one. You live under Him, for He is your King who has died for you. Serve Him not because you must, but because you are free from the shackles of sin and Satan and death forever. *Tetelestai*: “It is finished.” This is the day when we commemorate that our Lord’s work to redeem us is finished. It is also the day we commemorate that He did it all for us. Not for someone else. For us here, now, in this place. So, look around and see God’s hand at work, giving life where there was none and giving hope where it was all but lost. For us, He gave His dying breath so that we might live forever with Him. Amen.¹

¹ Adapted from the Good Friday sermon in the *For You* series by Concordia Publishing House.