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## Wounded for Me

### Isaiah 52:13-53:12

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Good Friday, April 18, 2014, by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

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“Calvary, Calvary....” When I arrived at Duke Chapel, there were so many questions about why I sing. I could talk about growing up in a musical family in which every sibling played an instrument—my oldest brother played the trombone, second brother saxophone, third brother drums, my sister played piano, my mother played the harmonica, and my father thought he could sing. I could talk about studying music formally for a bachelor’s degree or my denominational heritage rooted in the singing traditions of Wesleyan Holiness, Pentecostal, and Baptist churches. I could talk about how in these contexts preaching sometimes has a musicality and I might say like gospel singer and Durham native Shirley Caesar, “I sing my sermons and preach my songs.” I could say this. But really I sing because it’s an acknowledgment that sometimes words are insufficient. I sing because sometimes you can’t just say it. You have to sing it. At a birth. At a wedding. At a death. Sometimes it takes a melody, a sound, to express the inexpressible. What can you really say when God dies? There’s not much that can be said. Instead, I choose to offer a requiem for the redeemer.

That’s why the scripture we heard tonight from Isaiah is known as a servant song. That’s why Philippians 2 that declares he “emptied self, ... and humbled himself to the point of death on a cross” is known as the Christ hymn. They are songs because what really can be said when the creator of the cosmos finds himself on a cross? Not much can be said but a lot can be sung.

This is interesting because many Good Friday sermons focus on the seven last words of Christ, his final words, what he said, before his crucifixion. Those are important but what happens to him, even if we look at the bulletin cover, happens to his body. Jesus is not just a word, he’s a Word made flesh and it’s his flesh that is “wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities.”

The gospel writers make sure that we understand this. John notes that Jesus was flogged, had a crown of thorns put on his head, was struck in the face, carried the cross by himself, was crucified, and pierced in his side with a spear, causing blood and water to come out. The gospels want us to know it was his body that was tortured in that moment. Yet it’s interesting how we focus so much on his words on this holy night of nights—the seven last words on death row. It’s good to know what was on his mind as he dies. But his body reminds us that he lived an embodied life and the Christian faith is a material one, not just a spiritual, virtual one on twitter.

We’re still uncomfortable with the body in the Church even at Christ’s death. We want to turn away from Christ’s wounded flesh and just talk about his seven words. Neoplatonic philosophy has influenced Christianity for centuries with its emphasis on the immortal spiritual realm and viewing the material bodily realm as “less than” and not a part of the spiritual life. With this view, the goal is to escape bodily reality as a path to a deeper spirituality. No wonder nations can torture and exploit bodies as they are deemed irrelevant.

The Incarnation, however, would suggest otherwise. Particularly in the Protestant tradition with all of our focus historically on the Word of God, *sola scriptura*, it may appear as if God was only a word and never became a human body. Yet when God wanted to show us how much God loved the world, God didn’t say ‘I love you,’ God gave and showed us love through his bodily self-performance in Jesus Christ, revealing that if one wants to become more spiritual one should become more embodied as a human, more fully human. Body movement, full of grace and truth, hung high and stretched wide, may be the most beautiful gesture in the world. John says Christ’s body, even on the cross, is glory though it may be gory. From a Christian perspective, a cruciform body may be the epitome of beauty.

**And what an aesthetic move Jesus makes on this night. If we have ears to hear, we may hear his body talk. His wounds declare words. If the cross of Christ is central to Christianity, the heart of the Christian faith is a bruised and wounded body.**

**We may want to hide our pain and past wounds as if they cannot be a part of our faith. The truth is that the scars from our wounds will always be present as they were on the body of Jesus. Think about what many of our veterans endure. William Owens was inspired to write the first verse of a hymn after World War I. He saw a wounded veteran limping past him on the street and he thought, "He was wounded for me," which inspired him to write this verse, "Wounded for me, Wounded for me; There on the cross, He was wounded for me; Gone my transgressions, and now I am free; All because Jesus was wounded for me." For some, wounds of war never go away as I learned recently of friend's friend who committed suicide. A young man who had talked other people out of suicide, committed his own. For some who return to civilian life after war, fighting in war is not scary but going to the shopping mall is. Wounds of body and mind.**

**Violence doesn't just cause wounds, violence may actually stem from wounds. Hate-filled shootings and killings at Jewish-affiliated centers in Kansas. A stabbing frenzy at a PA high school. Children with wounds in an upscale, pristine community? Some may be surprised but if you live long enough you'll discover that wounds are everywhere and everyone bears them. The walking wounded may even matriculate and teach at Duke too. Don't be fooled. The color blue may indicate a bruise. It's a wounded world that put Jesus to death because wounded people will wound other people.**

**What kind of God would Jesus be anyway if he wasn't familiar with our wounds? A woundless God is a worthless God because he wouldn't comprehend human suffering. But a wounded God is worth our allegiance, obedience, and love because he knows what it means to be one of us. His wounds don't mean we will never have wounds. As one of us, his wounds indicate that we will have wounds and perhaps have to bear our own crosses in this life. His wounds show us that "we have come treading a path through the blood of the slaughtered." His wounds show us that he was "a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity." His wounds reveal that suffering is no respecter of persons. It stalks everyone and sniffs us out even if we've barricaded ourselves in our bedrooms. His wounds reveal that civic and religious powers may turn on you sometimes. Your friends and family may even become your worst foes. That's what his wounds reveal. However, without paying attention to his body, we would never know he had any wounds.**

**His wounds show us that God is in touch with the world. The disciple Thomas was adamant in feeling the wounds of Jesus post-resurrection because he needed to know Jesus understood his own pain and "borne our infirmities and carried our diseases." Because of his broken body and blood, his wounds, we can have communion with him.**

**I don't want a God who doesn't know what cancer is or juvenile dermatomyositis or alopecia areata. I want a God who knows what it is to climb up the rough side of the mountain, "Calvary's mournful mountain," so rough that you can only say like Psalm 22, "the strong bulls of Bashan surround [me] like a ravening and roaring lion." A well-manicured, pedicured, nip and tuck, Botox, cosmetic, plastic-surgery-seeking Christ wouldn't be salvific for those of us with wounds. I know when we embalm our loved ones we want to make them pretty, sometimes so much so they don't look real or like the person we knew. It can be a way of covering up death sometimes. Trying to make it appear pretty. But death is not pretty, oh so pretty, and life doesn't always smell like two-dozen red roses.**

**You know this if you are in touch with your wounds. If you are not in touch with your wounds, your spiritual life will be weak and your ministry even weaker. Your wounds can make you strong. A thorn in the flesh couldn't stop the apostle Paul who discovered that whenever he was weak then he was strong (2 Cor 12). And a cross, we know, did not stop Jesus. Wounds can help you be a faithful witness to the cruciform gospel and just**

because you're wounded doesn't mean you're worthless. Through the broken body of Jesus on the cross God redeems our woundedness.

And wounds can heal. "By his bruises we are healed." But the scars often remain. You're in good company because the wounds of the crucifixion were not erased by the resurrection. The scars are the embodied memory of the wounds of the world that Jesus carried. Jesus wouldn't make it into GQ magazine or make the list for 100 sexiest men alive and by the looks of it here, I'm not sure any of us would make that list! "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." Ancient near eastern media called him a "wounded wimp." Though he healed lepers throughout his ministry, at the end of his life he was treated like a leper and took on the wounds of the world he loved in order to reveal his love. His wounds show the extent of God's love. If Jesus never had wounds, God wouldn't be real love. Love caused his body to be crushed like a winepress and broken like bread. His love wounded him because love can hurt you and cause body aches and pains especially when it is unrequited. He was willing to die because of love. His wounds were worth it to him because we are worth it to him. His wounds let me know that God loves us and that God is *pro nobis*, for us.

When I look at his body, I'm reminded that wounds, no matter how deep, don't have to win. Jesus doesn't allow his wounds to defeat him nor do yours have to kill you. Even hanging there on the tree, his voice expresses his heart despite his wounds. The powers could break his body but not his soul. He still looks out for the long-term care of his mother—"Woman, here is your son." He still offers forgiveness to those who fall short--"Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." He still has an ongoing relationship with God-- "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." He still let's his desires be known—"I am thirsty." He still completes his mission. "It is finished." But that statement doesn't mean it's over. His wounded state will not silence him forever because wounded love will never die. Love never ends. Love will rise—because God is love and love is the only thing stronger than death.

Christ's wounds are a love song for the world and I have a new song to share: Jesus loves me this I know, for his body tells me so.