

Sermon on Good Friday: John 18 and 19, with emphasis on 18:12-27 and 19:38-42
April 6, 2007, at Custer Lutheran Fellowship by Pastor David Van Kley

Coming Out

Jesus, especially in the gospel of John, did nothing behind anyone's back. Take for example his response to the High Priest when questioned about his teachings: "I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the people come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them."

The same could not be said about Jesus' disciples. The moment he was arrested, most of them turned tail and ran. John mentions a few who didn't. Did you notice how Peter and an unidentified disciple "snuck" into the courtyard of the high priest? It seems that this disciple was actually a friend of the high priest's! He used this connection to get himself and Peter past the guards, incognito, of course. If anyone knew they were disciples, they might have ended up on crosses, too. As it was, three people thought they recognized Peter, only to hear him respond: "No way. Not me. I'm not your guy."

Five of Jesus' followers did stand their ground. Four were women—three named Mary and Jesus' aunt. The other was one of the twelve, described as "the one Jesus loved." They alone defied arrest and possibly death, by attending the crucifixion. But they were exceptions to the rule.

Recently, a pastor told me about a gay couple, two men, who'd come to him in private and asked if they could attend the church he serves.

"Why, of course," he said; "we'd love to have you. What should I tell people?"

"Don't tell anyone," they said. "We don't want to go public. We just want to come."

I can understand that. But those of you who know Arlene and I well know that we have a lesbian daughter who's handled the question of her identity quite differently. Almost from the moment she was sure of her sexual orientation, she came "out of the closet." Which made our situation as parents difficult: we couldn't easily hide her identity if she was going to be open about it. So, in a sense, we were forced out of the closet, too. First, we told our most trusted friends, then our family members, then this congregation, and finally, the South Dakota Synod of the ELCA. There are consequences for being open about something so controversial. But we decided some time ago that we can't live a lie: we must be who we are and let others decide whether to take us or leave us.

I tell you all this because I believe it is somewhat that way with our identity as followers of Jesus. Many of us prefer to keep that part of who we are hidden. We don't want to go public with our Christianity.

It's not that we, like Peter and the other disciples, would face death if we own up to this allegiance. Still, there are some consequences for making it known.

We have reputations to protect! Some of us don't want to be associated with religious fanatics, with people who wear their Christianity on their sleeves, who always seem to have simple answers to complex questions. You know: the people who are always getting it on the Colbert Report and Jon Stewart on TV. We don't be like them.

Others of us, in this post-modern world, don't want people to connect us with something as old-fashioned and boring as "church." It's OK to be "**spiritual**," but we don't want to be "**religious**." God forbid!

Perhaps we, like Peter, find ourselves struggling with doubts about Jesus. We go to church, but we're not sure we have everything straight in our minds our hearts. We let our confusion and uncertainty keep us from boldly expressing what we **do** believe.

Or maybe, just maybe, we're afraid that if we go public as baptized believers in Christ, someone will hold us to a higher standard than we'd like: a higher standard of loving, a higher standard of giving, a higher standard of living.

So we play it close to the vest. Like the people of Lake Wobegon, we're shy about our faith. We say that it's a private, not a public thing. A secret to hold inside. We keep one foot firmly planted in the closet.

Unlike our Lord. I can imagine nothing more public than hanging in front of a crowd of people, naked, dying, because you love them.

John's gospel is not kind to secret believers. In the text, Jesus does not have to accuse Peter: a rooster does it for him! Nor does John accuse the nameless disciple in the courtyard; yet, we realize that his silence constitutes denial as well. Perhaps we are more like these than we'd care to admit.

But look how the passion ends! We read, "after these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a **secret** one because of his fear of the leaders, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds." Well, you can't hide a hundred pounds of burial spices! And Pilate is not the right guy to see if you want to keep your allegiances secret!

Which is to say, these two disciples of Jesus came out of the closet on Good Friday. Something about the cross made it possible. The public spectacle of God's fierce love in a world of hate. Non-violent grace contrasted with the violent will of the powers of death and destruction. Forgiveness poured out like rivers, in the blood of the lamb. Forgiveness for them, who had stood silently by, while Jesus was abused. All of this empowered Joseph and Nicodemus to roll up their sleeves and let the love of Christ

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show.

Today, we stand before the cross of Christ, which has the power to transform us shy Christians into people who stand up and are counted and who roll up their sleeves. So may it be. Amen.