

Good Friday 2022  
John 18:1-19:42  
April 15, 2022  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

We have often gotten it **so** wrong. In lots of ways, but even in our “keeping” of Good Friday. Maybe it’s better to say our “observance” of Good Friday? We **are**, in a way, “observing” the events we hear about in the Passion reading. But being an observer sounds so clinical, so “third party,” so disengaged. In all things faith-related, we are called to participate, heart-and-soul. That’s why we were invited to come forward last night for the laying on of hands and individual absolution, why we are invited tonight to come forward and reverence the cross, why tomorrow night we will be invited to gather in our churchyard, witness the lighting of the Easter fire, process into this darkened sanctuary, use the flame of the Paschal candle to light our individual tapers during the singing of the Exsultet, the first great hymn of Easter. This we get right! But in other ways, over the ages, and in our own lives, we’ve gotten it so wrong.

An example of Christians getting it wrong: initiating pogroms against Jews on Good Friday. Tonight is also the beginning of Passover, which 3 of the 4 Gospels say was the ritual meal Jesus celebrated with His friends the night before He died. Over the centuries, Christians have terrorized Jews, destroying their property, harming them, killing them, rounding them up for deportation, in some supposed honoring of the day Christ died. We got it so wrong....

Maybe you, too, began to participate in webinars and other on-line offerings during the pandemic when we were barely leaving the house. About a year ago Pastor Mark & I logged onto a Zoom Evening sponsored by the Chabad of the Shore. The author was 100-year-old Marthe Cohen, whose autobiography is called *Behind Enemy Lines*. She grew up in a Jewish family in French Lorraine, eastern France, 30 miles from the German border, so she was fluent in French, German

and Yiddish. Besides for speaking perfect German and being incredibly gutsy, she was fair-skinned and could easily pass as a Gentile, so she agreed to be sort of a double-agent during World War II. Her memoir is honest about hardships and hatred she encountered, but it's also filled with faith and optimism.

At one point in the narrative Marte is helping her family flee to southern France, armed with false identity papers. (Her grandmother, *Grosmitter*, can't walk so is seated on a bicycle. Marthe holds the handlebars and Marthe's mother keeps the grandmother propped up, preventing her from listing to one side and falling off.) Marthe is given the name of a clergyperson who serves as a link in a chain to help them cross from the Occupied into the Unoccupied Zone where they hope to be safe from deportation to the concentration camps. The clergyman says:

"I've been expecting you. I'll help you because it is the right thing to do. But you should know this from the outset – I'd never trust a Jew."

"How can you say that?" I asked, appalled. "We'd rather be killed than betray you to the Germans if we were caught!"

"Don't you know the story of Judas?" The priest sneered...

Years of hurt and anger at this long-held [Christian] view of Jews bubbled to the surface in me. I remembered reading the catechisms of my friends at school in Metz and being horrified by the condemnation of all Jews as responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus on the basis of Judas Iscariot's behavior...

"We're not Judas!" I cried, my face reddening. "That happened thousands of years ago. We have nothing to do with Judas. And anyway, how can you reconcile feeling such terrible contempt for all Jews while your faith is based on the teachings of Jesus and the belief that Jesus is the son of God? Don't you know that Jesus was a Jew?"

[He] shrugged his shoulders as if he didn't believe me. "I've told you I'll help you," he said coldly. "It's the Christian thing to do."

There was nothing I would have liked more than to tell him that my family no longer needed his help and that we'd somehow manage without him.<sup>1</sup>

So **there's** the clergy who is **not** Christlike, who gets it terribly wrong; but thankfully there are also those who get it right and **do** the Christlike thing. Marthe describes the harrowing part of the journey right before crossing into the Free Zone, when threat of being denounced is greatest.

"Dear God," I prayed under my breath, "protect us now."

I forced my gaze forward, trying not to make eye contact with these people as we approached their homes. But I pictured us in their eyes – three women, three strangers, one clearly extremely frail, making a solitary crossing so close to nightfall in such an isolated spot. Only those fleeing from the German authorities would risk such a journey.

Taking a deep breath, I turned to look at the farmers again. Maybe direct eye contact would help after all, I reasoned. Maybe my silent pleas would be etched across my face. I might already have lost four members of my family today, my eyes told them, please help me save these two old women who've never done anybody any harm.

One by one as we approached, the men stopped smoking and the women stopped talking, and they all turned to stare back at us. There was near silence as we squeaked along with our bicycle, watching them watch us.

An old man in a dark shirt and working trousers stood up from his rickety old wooden chair as we passed his house and stared at us intently. I returned his gaze, my hands clammy on the handlebars. Without saying a word, he suddenly dropped onto one knee and, hand on his chest, lowered his head in prayer. Next to him, his wife knelt on both knees in the dirt and made the sign of the cross. At the next house, two men similarly fell to their knees and began praying for us, their soft murmurings carried to us on the summer evening breeze.

A teenage girl, not much younger than I, stopped scratching the neck of her much-loved horse and clasped her hands together in prayer. And so on, along the row, men and women, desperately poor, urgently in need of the money they could so easily have earned from us as a reward, each one saying a prayer to guide us on our way.

I could hardly believe my eyes. It was so beautiful, the humanity of it. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I nodded my head in silent thanks to each and every one we passed. How could I, even for the shortest minute, have doubted them, these kind, simple people who were as much oppressed... as we were? Lowering my head, I pressed on, taking my mother and grandmother to unoccupied France and, I hoped, to safety...

Another family had been arrested trying to cross the border that morning. The [soldiers] must have been happy with their day's quota and been so tied up with paperwork that they hadn't bothered to look for any more Jews. I was never able to find out who they were or what happened to them, but they were undoubtedly my family's sacrificial lambs. May they rest in peace.<sup>2</sup>

The “professional Christian” had gotten it so wrong and the peasants, the “people in the pew” got it exactly right. They knew that Jesus, our “sacrificial Lamb” of God, embraces **all** people as God's children: the members of His Body, the Church; the original “Chosen” people, the Jews, the people of promise, His own people; Muslims, the descendants of Jesus' ancestor Ishmael, who are also “people of the Book”; Hindus, Buddhists, members of the Baha'i religion, indigenous peoples all around the world, people of **all** faiths and people of **none**: every one made in God's image, every one priceless in value, none of them to be terrorized, denounced, rejected, turned away in

their time of need, left to die. “Whenever you did it to one of the least of these, who are members of My family, you did it to Me.” (Matthew 25:40)

*The Adoration of the Shepherds* at the manger is my favorite Christmas artwork. Many artists have created their own version, but recently I discovered one I’d never seen before. It’s called *The Adoration of the Shepherds with St. Francis of Assisi and St. Claire* (by Giovan Battista Trotti). The light in the painting draws our eyes to Mother & Baby, but in the foreground we also notice a shepherd binding a lamb’s legs. Above the stable scene we see men ascending a staircase by torchlight, with the bound lamb slung over the shoulders of one of them. The Baby in the manger is also the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And that bound Lamb also symbolizes all of those for whom Christ suffered, all of those who suffer from inhumanity, prejudice and hatred, from war, hunger, sickness, poverty, loneliness, lovelessness, mental illness, addictions and despair.

This risen Christ on the cross has no hands. He reminds us of Teresa of Avila’s wisdom: “Christ has no body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which He looks compassion on this world, yours are the feet on which He walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which He blesses all the world.” In the cross may we all find grace to “get it right,” to sink on our knees in prayer **and** to reach out in love: to help, to heal, to accompany, to bless. Amen

<sup>1</sup>Marthe Cohen with Wendy Holden, *Behind Enemy Lines: The True Story of a French Jewish Spy in Nazi Germany* (NY: Three Rivers, 2002), pp. 76-77.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, pp. 82-83.

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