

# LEFT HANGING

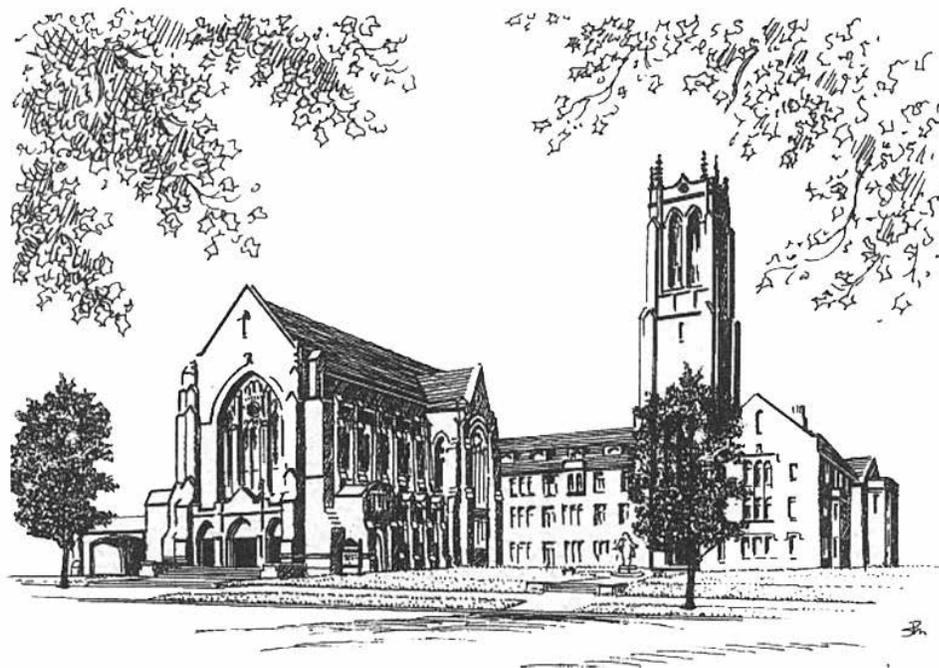
by

Dr. Bill Kerley

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*Good Friday*

Noon



## ST. PAUL'S

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

5501 Main Street

Houston, Texas 77004-6917

713-528-0527

[www.stpaulshouston.org](http://www.stpaulshouston.org)

**Texts: Isaiah 52:13-53:12 • Psalm 22 • Hebrews 10:16-25 • John 18:1-19:42**

The last time it was my privilege to give the homily at this Good Friday service, I asked a friend of mine if she would attend.

“Why would I do that?” she asked.

She is a fierce member of the largest and fastest growing denomination in this country — those who say, sometimes like she does, vociferously, “I am spiritual but NOT religious!”

I knew that most any reason I would give someone else more faith-friendly wouldn't work, so I simply said, “I'm giving the homily and it would please me very much if you would come.”

She did.

Some weeks later, we ran into each other in, of all places, the grocery store. There, somewhere between the kitty litter and the canned goods we embraced and said our “Hellos.” Then I asked, “Well, what did you think of the Good Friday service?”

To be honest, I didn't give a hoot what she thought. What I wanted her to say was, “It was absolutely fabulous. Your cathedral is the most beautiful in Houston. The music was transcendent and transformative. The liturgy was precisely the thing to prepare one to go through somber, silent Saturday and to celebrate Easter Sunday. As for your homily, I doubt there has ever been put together a finer collection of words in the English language.” (While you're are wishing for good outcomes, might as well go big.)

Of course, she didn't say anything like that. Not even close. She said, “I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all. It was such a downer. It was so . . ., it was so bleak.”

I was taken aback, disappointed, shocked at her frankness, perhaps a smidgen hurt.

However, as I made my way over to the produce section, I thought: what a perfect one-word description of what we call Good Friday: bleak.

It was a bleak day.

It was bleak for Jesus.

It was bleak for those who had hung their hopes on him.

Likely bleak for us if we observe it properly.

This Good Friday story is a dark drama. It is intended as such.

Because we know the end of the story, or think we do, our tendency is to skip-step over Good Friday, if not all of Lent, and jump right into the patch of lilies and colored eggs we call Easter. For many the whole affair is a tidy evacuation plan for the next world, not a program for living this one.

By the way, some people think that the phrase “Good Friday” comes from a corruption of the words “God’s Friday.” In fact “Good Friday” is derived from an antiquated use of the word “good.” In an earlier time the word “good” meant “sacred” or “holy.” At one time in the liturgical calendar the Wednesday before Easter was called “Good Wednesday.”

Either way, this day, like all our days, does belong to God, and it, like all our days, is holy and sacred. This day gives us an opportunity to step deeper into Sacred Mystery.

All of the Gospel writers, though they may differ about other matters, agree that there came a time in the last hours of the life of Jesus when he was handed over to the authorities for them to do with him what they pleased. Jesus was no longer in control.

If we are to experience all that Easter holds for us, we must be willing to be handed over as well. Being handed over is, however, what we are tempted to avoid at all costs.

The story has it that after he had a seder meal with his disciples, he went off into the garden to pray and it was then that he was “handed over.”

After being “handed over,” Jesus didn’t do any of the things that had, up until then, marked his ministry. No miracles. No teachings. He barely says a word.

In the gospel stories Jesus is very active. He initiates much, says much, sees much that he comments on — most of his words and deeds receiving increasingly

harsh criticism and response. All of this activity culminated in that scene in the garden where he was “handed over.” After this he does nothing.

After being handed over, things are done to him. They took him, they led him away, they dressed him, they mocked him, they hit him, they spat on him, they reviled him, they executed him.

When he does say what little he says, it is remarkably different from everything he said before being “handed over.” Earlier everything he says is spoken authoritatively, effectively, decisively, changing situations by his actions, taking fishermen from their nets, casting out demons, stilling a storm with his words, confounding his critics. But after being handed over, all of that dramatically changes. He is no longer one who does. He is one who is done to.

According to the Gospel of John, at the moment he is handed over Jesus passes from unrestrained freedom to total constraint. Light changes to darkness. He moves from being active to being passive, a word closely related to the word “passion,” which means to have something done unto one. It is also related to our word “patient.” Patient not in the sense of waiting but in the sense of being a patient, ending up in a position where things are done to one.

Many of you know what being “handed over” is like. If you don’t, just wait; you will. A relationship ends horribly. A child dies. An addiction wrecks the life of a loved one. Someone betrays you. Or, you betray someone and it can’t be undone. An early childhood wound blocks the sunshine out of every day that you live. The list is as long as there are human beings, it seems.

Not too terribly long ago I was going along minding my own business one moment and the next thing I knew I was lying on an operating table waiting for a surgeon to open my chest for a quadruple bypass surgery. I had been absolutely “handed over.”

The question I had used for everything in my life up until then was, “What shall I do about this?”

Suddenly the question became, “What is to happen to me?”

My spiritual teacher says there are only two ways to be “handed over.” Either it is done to you through great suffering or you choose it by profound spiritual practice. Either way it seems a requirement of the spiritual path.

Not only are we daily, even hourly, tempted with the things Jesus faced at the beginning of his ministry — the need to succeed, be right, and be in control — but also, more often than not, we give in to them. We so want to win, be right, be in control. We do not want to be handed over. When we are handed over we learn first hand that what he said was true: we can’t take anything we think matters to us through the narrow gate through which God has come to claim us and calls us to go through to have the abundant life that Jesus taught, lived, and offers.

We are, however, in control of next to nothing. Just let the electricity go out in our homes and we discover how dependent we are on things over which we have virtually no control. When the electricity goes off so does the heating or air conditioning, lights to read by, the means of cooking and keeping time.

We not only fear being handed over. We resent it. Whenever possible we want to deny or conceal such a condition.

Notice how we attach dignity and worth to what a person does, to one’s ability to, as we put it, “make it on one’s own.” One of the first questions we want to ask of someone when we first meet them is, “What do you do?” as if the answer to that question contained all that can be said about a person.

I dislike that question so much that now when asked, “What do you do?” my response is: “About what?”

This notion of being busy, keeping busy, has even worked its way into our religious lexicon: Idle hands are the devil’s workshop.

We come to worship services during Holy Week and hear about the Passion of Jesus. We are tempted to misunderstand “passion” as meaning “pain” or “suffering.”

Hardly. It primarily means dependence, exposure, waiting, no longer being in control, being the object of what is done.

This “being handed over,” was not Jesus’ misfortune. It was the decisive manifestation of his divinity.

How so?

It reflected, however humanly — and I think this is so that we might more fully identify with him — his absolute willingness to trust in that reality he referred to as Abba, Daddy, Father.

Being handed over is one of the last things any of us wants and in the process of working to avoid it, we also avoid falling into the loving hands of God. We would rather be right, successful, and in control than trusting.

Jesus asked us to follow him and, like his early disciples, we quickly respond, “You bet. What’s in it for me? Can I sit by your right side?”

Then we notice he is carrying a cross and has one for us and we back off a bit and say, “On second thought, is it okay if we just believe in you, worship you, have faith in you rather than following you? That would be a whole lot easier on us if you don’t mind.”

And he weeps.

I have come to believe that wise religion and useful spirituality are to lead us into a willingness to be handed over, not just at the end of our lives when we are physically no longer able to do much for ourselves, but from the very beginning of the journey. Jesus was willing to be handed over into the loving hands of God when he refused to give in to those temptations in the desert and lived that way until his death on the cross. All along the way he says to us, “Follow me. Live like this.”

How do we do that?

By practicing, as did Jesus, the limitless qualities of love, compassion, non-violence, justice and inclusiveness. We work at trying to see the world as he did, by living lives as if God really ran the show. We begin, however slowly and painfully, to realize that the Kingdom of God is not a place to get to but a place to come from. We want to be boss and in charge, he calls us to be servants and to follow.

We sang today a hymn familiar to some of us from our childhoods — “When I Survey The Wondrous Cross.”

When you do look at the cross, and I hope you do, I carry one with me daily to help remind me, keep in mind that it was we who put him there and we hang there with him.

When you survey the wondrous cross, don't think, "Look what he did for me."

Rather, confess, "Look, what we did to him."

We are exposed in confronting the cross to seeing the consequences of our trying to be in control, get it right and succeed.

As horrible as it feels, and is, for us to be handed over, it is the only way God has a chance to bring life out of death.

In looking up at him spread-eagle there on the cross we see that we weren't successful, we weren't in control, we didn't get it right. This day is "good" for us. It is good for us to stare into the mess we make of things when we try to be in control and right and inform God how things should be, when we allow "the system" to run the show.

Hanging there vulnerable, unable to do a thing about our situation except surrender and trust, we experience that we are not in control, we can't be successful in our way of defining things.

Hanging there where we put ourselves, we are left where God's love has the only opening to reach us. We are left with nothing to hang on to. We realize that all our efforts to hang on, to be in control, to succeed, to be right fail us utterly.

In a proper observance of Good Friday, we are left hanging.