

“Through the Curtain”

Ecumenical Good Friday Service, 1st UMC, Hancock

Matthew 27:45-54

Have you ever been separated from someone you loved? Maybe you’ve lost your child at the grocery store. True story: When our son about 5 years old, he got separated from us in the massive California Science Center in Los Angeles. Not one of my best days as a dad.

Maybe you’ve experienced a long-distance relationship. While my wife and I were dating, we were separated by the Atlantic Ocean and five time zones. At least we had phones.

Sometimes separation is a physical barrier, like geography or prison. Sometimes it is an emotional barrier. A harsh word spoken in anger leads to the silent treatment. A grudge settles in your heart, eats away at your soul, and causes you to block someone’s phone number and unfriend them on Facebook. We’ve all lived there. We’ve all experienced separation.

In the case of our relationship with God, it is neither a physical barrier nor an emotional barrier that separates us. It is a spiritual barrier. Our sin is like an ocean that we can never cross to get back to God.

When watching live performances of the Crucifixion, I am always struck by the depth of the love of Jesus. It is hard enough to watch the crucifixion on a stage; I can’t even begin to imagine what it must have been like in real life. The sound of nails piercing human flesh. The intense darkness falling over the land. Hearing Jesus call out for God the Father. I shudder at the thought of it all.

The Gospel of Matthew says Jesus cried out in a loud voice as he died. (Matthew 27:50) The Gospel of John tells us Christ’s last words were, “It is finished.” (John 19:30) This was the most significant moment for humanity for all time; the moment when the Son of the Living God gave up his spirit and died. Matthew says, “At that moment the curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.” (Matthew 27:51)

Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience. They knew about this curtain. It had been around for a long time, since Moses built the tabernacle in the wilderness. For forty years, the Israelites had to set up this massive, heavy

curtain, and take it down every time they moved. We don't know how thick the curtain was, but it was thick enough to block out anyone's view of the Most Holy Place, where the Seat of Mercy was, the literal presence of God's glory. My guess is the Hebrews were relieved when King Solomon finally finished building the great temple, and they no longer had to carry the curtain around. Moses' original curtain was about 15 feet high and 15 feet wide. (Exodus 26:31-35) Solomon's was twice as big. (1 Kings 6:19-20)

This curtain was a stark, physical reminder of the people's separation from God. It was for their own good. God's holy, awesome presence would have consumed a mere human. But the curtain also represented the ache and pain of an incomplete relationship. It was like checking God's phone, looking to see if there were any new messages from the people he loved, but sadly, there was no signal.

When Jesus died, this 30-foot long impenetrable veil was torn. Significantly, it torn from top to bottom. Without a scaffold or a really tall ladder, it would have been humanly impossible to tear the curtain this way. That is exactly the point. The only way the curtain could have torn at that moment was solely by an act of God.

Jesus said, "It is finished." At the same time, the Bible says, "The curtain was torn." What did Jesus really do for us that day on the cross? Jesus took away the sin that separated us from God. Jesus opened the door to a relationship with the Author of Love. Jesus is our bridge over the ocean that separates us. It seems impossible that God could forgive the sins of the whole world, but through Jesus Christ on the cross, that is exactly what God did.

The book of Hebrews helps us understand Jesus' role in our salvation. From the story of Good Friday, we understand Jesus was the sacrifice. But there is something else unique about Jesus; he was also the priest. Listen to this passage in Hebrews 10:11-14:

¹¹Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹²But when this priest [Jesus] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³and since that time he waits

for his enemies to be made his footstool. ¹⁴For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

The amazing news is, by Jesus’ death, we are made holy. By offering his own life, Jesus simultaneously became both the priest and the sacrifice, for us. Nothing like this had ever been done before, and we will never see anything like it again. So what does this mean for us? Let me continue reading at verse 19.

¹⁹Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. ²³Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

Jesus fulfilled two roles: as the sacrifice, he took the blame and the punishment we deserved. We turned our backs on God. We fell victim to our own pride, our own selfishness. Forgiveness does not mean, it doesn’t matter. It matters a great deal, so much, that our forgiveness was purchased with the life of Christ. Jesus was the sacrifice that won our freedom. But Jesus is also the priest, our go-between, our intercessor, our conduit of grace. The priest is the one the people trust to lead them to God, to lead by example, to lead them in worship and prayer and praise. Only Jesus could fulfill both roles for us.

I used to play hide-and-seek with my kids when they were younger. Sometimes I would hide behind a door, and when they found me, I’d jump out and say, “Boo!” It was only a game, but it could represent a real fear – that my children could be separated from me.

The good news is, thanks to Jesus, we do not have to be separated from God anymore. Hear these final words of encouragement from Hebrews 4:14-16.

¹⁴Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with

our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Do you know you can approach God’s throne of grace with confidence? It is because Jesus, our high priest, invites us. If you are hiding from God, come out into the light of God’s love. If you feel like God is hidden, read the story of the crucifixion again. The curtain is torn. The door is open. The bridge is built. The signal is amplified. Our sins are no longer held against us. At every moment, we can confess our sin, repent and be made whole again. In the name of Jesus Christ, there is no more separation from God.

May you look through the curtain and find the love of God, which will never leave you or forsake, and may God never be hidden from you. Amen.