

A LOVE STORY ABOUT YOU

In March 1986, USA Today carried a front-page story about the crucifixion of Jesus. It was based on a doctor's article in the New England Journal of Medicine. After commenting on the medical dimensions of crucifixion, the doctor observed that we tend to romanticize the death of Jesus. In reality, he said, it was one of the most brutal deaths anyone could ever imagine. Ancient writers tell us that scourging, which often preceded crucifixion, was itself a terrifying ordeal. It wasn't unheard of for a victim to die during the scourging. Ancient writers also tell us that victims of crucifixion sometimes went insane. They spent their final hours on earth completely out of their mind. One ancient writer tells us that after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, Jewish freedom fighters waged guerrilla warfare against the Romans. One day the leader of a small guerrilla group was captured. The Romans threatened to crucify him in plain sight of the others, who were holed up in caves on a steep hillside. The rest of the guerrillas surrendered rather than see their leader suffer such a humiliating and horrible execution.

All of this raises a question, a tremendous question. Why did Jesus allow himself to suffer death by crucifixion? Why did he submit to such a horrendous ordeal? The answers people give to that question boil down to three main ones.

First, Jesus wanted his death to be a sign. He wanted it to say, in a dramatic way, what he told his disciples so often during his life: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." John 15:13 Second, Jesus wanted his death to be an invitation. He wanted to invite us to do what he told his disciples to do so often during his life: "Love one another as I love you." John 15:12 Finally, Jesus wanted his death to be a revelation. Again, he wanted to tell us what he told his disciples so often during his life, that love entails suffering: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." Mark 8:34, and so the crucifixion of Jesus makes three important statements. First, it's a sign of Jesus' love for us.

Second, it's an invitation for us to love as Jesus loved. And, finally, it's a revelation that love entails suffering. Of these three statements, the final one is the one we need to hear, especially in our day. In our modern era of painkillers and instant gratification, we tend to forget that life entails suffering. We tend to forget that love entails suffering.

On Monday night, March 24, 1986, just before the Academy Awards, Barbara Walters interviewed President and Mrs. Reagan. One of the questions she asked was how they managed to keep their love alive across 35 years of married life. When they didn't answer immediately, Barbara tried to help them by saying, "Was it because both of you were so willing to give and take on a 50-50 basis?" The first lady broke into a gentle laugh and said, "Oh my, married life never breaks that evenly, Sometimes it's more like 90. So often one of us has had to give up so much more than the other." The president nodded in total agreement. That was the high point of the interview, because it made such an important point: When it comes to love, we can't keep score! The day a husband or a wife begins to keep score in a marriage is the day that marriage begins to die. Married love and family love, by nature, involve pain- sometimes a great deal of pain. And that pain rarely divides

itself evenly between family members. More often than not it's a lopsided division- sometimes terribly lopsided, like 90-10.

And this brings us back to our starting point, the crucifixion of Jesus. By his painful death, Jesus speaks a threefold message to us. First, Jesus says he loves us: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Second, Jesus says we should love one another: "Love one another as I love you." Finally, Jesus says love entails suffering: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." In conclusion, then, the crucifixion of Jesus is a sign of love, an invitation to love, and a revelation about love. It tells us that Jesus loves us with the highest love. It invites us to try to love others in the same way. It reminds us that love will always involve suffering. This is the practical lesson of love that Jesus wants us to carry home from this liturgy. This is also the practical lesson of love that Jesus wants us to share with the world. He wants us to tell the world by the example of our love that he loves us, that we should love one another, and that love will always entail suffering- sometimes a great deal of suffering.

"Lord, teach us to love.

Teach us to love others as you love us.

Teach us to love and not to keep score;

Teach us to love and not to heed the pain;

Teach us to love and not to insist on an equal return;

Teach us to love and not to ask for any special reward, except to know that we are doing your will."

When you do this, you will know that.

YOU ARE LOVED,

Deacon Dan