

“O SACRED HEAD”

John 19:1-7; Romans 5:6-11

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Rev. Jerry Duggins

We began this series on the hymns of the church back in June on Ascension Sunday with *All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name*. We moved from praise to the marvelous workings of the *Spirit* on Pentecost. We continued on Trinity speaking of God's majesty with *Holy, Holy, Holy*; followed that up with the joys of Christian community and *Blest Be the Tie that Binds*. June finished up with *Love Divine*. In July we talked about sparrows, focusing on God's care for us in *His eye is on the Sparrow*, followed by a multitude of images celebrating God's work throughout creation in *God of the Sparrow*. Two weeks ago, we “sang” *the Mighty Power of God*, and last week Lisa spoke to you about that classic hymn *God of Grace and God of Glory*.

We've been upbeat and positive because this is precisely where a lot of our hymnody goes: the beauty of creation, the power and love of God, the joy of Christian fellowship, the depth of God's care and provision. But this is not the whole story of our faith. There's something else that makes us uncomfortable and challenges us. Most of our hymns have muted the sorrow we associate with Jesus' passion and death and emphasized the joy and glory of the resurrection. Rightfully so! We are a “resurrection people.” New life is what faith is for!

On the other hand, there is no resurrection without death. This is the challenge of our faith, and our hymns do sing about this as well. Unsurprisingly, we sing most of these hymns in the season of Lent when we attend to the events of Jesus' life, particularly his final week of suffering and death. *O Sacred Head Now Wounded* recalls the events around Jesus' trial, the mockery and shame heaped upon him, specifically the crown of thorns pressed upon his head. The hymn reminds us that the shame really belongs to us for our “transgressions,” that the “deadly pain” he suffered should have been ours. The hymn emphasizes what Paul tells us in Romans: “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”

I've had a lot of conversations over the years with youth in confirmation classes and older adults who struggle to make sense of what it means to say that Jesus died for our sins. How is it that a person's death 2000 years ago makes up for the sins I commit today? How can all the sins of the world be heaped up on one person? What sort of God is it that requires this kind of sacrifice? It all sounds a bit primitive.

These sorts of questions address themselves to what theologians have called the theory of atonement. How is it that Jesus' death makes us right with God? When I was in seminary, there were basically three views. One saw his death as a legal transaction in which Jesus pays the penalty for the sin. One viewed the crucifixion and resurrection as a single event celebrating Jesus' victory over evil. And a third, attributed to Ignatius of the third century interpreted the crucifixion as a demonstration of God's love for us. All

of these views have been nuanced in a great variety of ways by contemporary theologians. I will confess to not having kept up with the growing mass of literature around the subject. The sheer volume of words is probably an indication that we don't really know. This is often the case when we think about issues involving God. The sacred always wants to preserve something of the mystery.

Fortunately, in matters of faith, we have more than our minds to see us through. We have hearts and feet to direct us as well. And we have hymns that reflect the fullness of our faith. *O Sacred Head* invites to consider not just the meaning of Jesus' death, but into the experience of that death as well.

This is what many of us find so meaningful about the services during Holy Week. The readings, the music, the prayers, and the sacrament speak to our whole person. This hymn was originally part of a much longer poem, *Salve Caput Cruentatum*, attributed to Bernard of Clairvoux from the twelfth century. The poem was divided into seven cantos, one for each day of Holy Week, reflecting on various parts of Christ's body: feet, knees, hands, sides, breast, heart, and head. Parts of the seventh canto were translated into German in the 17th century by Paul Gerhardt and attached to music by Hans Leo Hassler. I find it amusing that the music was first written for a love song called *My Heart is Distracted by a Gentile Maid*. We owe the English translation to James Alexander and the particular harmonization to J.S. Bach.

Passion Chorale, as we know the tune today, was used by Bach in *St. Matthew's Passion*, and a *Christmas Oratorio*. At first glance, it seems odd that a tune that evokes the feeling of the passion so well was originally a secular love song. But a closer look reveals this serious and somber hymn to really be focused on love. The dark imagery captures so well the sacrificial love of God expressed in the sufferings that Jesus endured. Only a very cold heart could fail to hear the unspoken refrain: "This much I am willing to do for you, and so much more."

Such sacrifice is intended to inspire love in us for God. "Lord, let me never, never outlive my love to Thee. The hymn narrates events that it's hard to wrap our minds around. We could grasp the grief, the shame, the scorn and the thorns if we were listening to some tragic opera; but to see these things alongside the glory, the bliss, the joy, the favor and the love pulls us out of our heads and into our hearts. This is not the effusive praise and thanksgiving of most of our hymns. The tune and the words invite us into something deeper, into the core of our faith. God is not the overindulgent grandparent seeing to our every knee, protecting us from every injury or harm. God is among us, standing in our place, suffering our griefs, enduring our pain with a love that goes so much deeper than anything we could imagine.

So there's no dancing in the streets with this one, no clapping of the hands; but our faith would be a great deal poorer without this hymn and others like it. These are hymns that inspire us to awe, that call us to reflect more deeply on our faith, and encourage us to a more profound and enduring love. Even though it's not a "happy" hymn, it's still among my favorites. Amen.