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Sermon Title: Good Friday: The Ugly Truth
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Marketing. Rebranding. It inevitably ends up calling the worst day in Christianity "Good Friday." Last week I did college tours with my granddaughter: Smith, Mount Holyoke, Wellesley, two in western Massachusetts, one outside of Boston. We went right after one nor'easter, and just before the last nor'easter, yet none of the colleges marketed themselves with: "Come on up! It's freezing . . . snowing . . . there's a blustery wind, bundle up, and wear earmuffs!" Nope. They made it all sound good.

Good Monday. Good Friday. Good whatever day you're there! In the Admissions Office, the walls are covered with beautiful New England photos of their campus at its best, the idyllic, iconic New England autumn leaves or the late-spring bloom of flowers; and even the winter photos are all taken about a half-hour after a snowstorm, when the college is nestled under a downy soft layer of picture-perfect white snow. There's no slush, no ice, no students shushing to class in snowshoes. It's all good. Marketing. Rebranding.

Well, somewhere along the line, this most awful of Christian days, a Friday, the day of Jesus's torture, crucifixion, and death . . . this horrible, brutal Friday became "Good Friday."

If you Google it, you get three plausible explanations: One, there's been a long-time discussion over the closeness of the words "good" and God. So maybe the modern spelling of "Good Friday" used to be "God's Friday." Seems possible. I know I've played off those two words separated by a single O.

Number two is a nice philosophical twist. Yes, it's horrific what happened to Jesus on Good Friday, but the end result has been "good" for everybody. God loves us. Jesus died for our sins, and we are forgiven. Plus, all the bad things get reversed on Easter: Jesus is raised from the dead, proof of God's power of life over death. So it's all good, even Friday. Seems reasonable.

Number three is the most popular theory, that in the old days, in old English, "good" meant "holy." And "holy" means sacred, set apart, very, very special.

So, Good Friday is Good as in God, Good as in really, really good, and Good as in holy. Let's just accept all three explanations. No matter how you slice it, in the end, *in the end*, it is a "Good Friday." And we'll get to that end.

But I've titled this sermon "The Ugly Truth" because the ugly truth is that the first Good Friday wasn't Good. It wasn't Good as in "godly," it wasn't Good as in "good," it wasn't Good as in "holy." Instead, Good Friday was the worst of human nature unleashed. The world of politics, the world of religion, the world of friends, even the world of the individual—all those worlds failed the test of common decency.

On Good Friday everybody failed Jesus. I can summarize it all very quickly. Jesus began his public ministry when he was 30. For three years, he went around doing good. It's as simple as that. He never hurt anybody. He helped everybody—up, down; rich, poor; good, bad. Jesus helped them all. For three years Jesus did and said just the right things at just the right time for just the right person. Which annoyed the heck out of some people, scared the heck out of other people. At the end of those three years, the political leaders of his day and the religious leaders of his day—they all felt threatened by him.

He was too nice, too popular. He had to be stopped. And so, they conspired to get rid of him. Now, Jesus came to Jerusalem for the Jewish Passover and the "people," the "folks," the everyday salt-of-the-earth, go-to-work, good-neighbor, do-your-best people, they loved him. That's why they had that great Palm Sunday parade with everybody cheering, waving palms, shouting "Hosanna," just like here in Church last Sunday: a great big festive, happy day. For the regular people. But the "big people," the powerbrokers of government and religion, they conspired to get rid of him.

They bribed Judas to betray him. They got false witnesses to lie about him. They held a "show trial" in secret, in the middle of the night. They scared away his friends. They tortured him, mocked him, force-marched him to the cross.

And there, on the cross, literally, physically, graphically, Jesus's life was poured out for us. He died for us. In religious terms, we call it "atonement." "Atonement" means to make things right. Jesus's sacrifice makes things right.

It's not a pretty part of the Christian story. It's not a comfortable part, the idea that Jesus died to save us. But when it happens in our world, when people make a sacrifice for others, we respect it, we admire it, we honor it. Soldiers, firefighters, police—what do we say about them? We say, "They put their lives on the line." And if they lose their lives, we say, "They laid down their lives for us." And we applaud it. Salute it. Memorialize it.

Did you follow the story of the French policemen who exchanged himself for a hostage during a terrorist attack in France two weeks ago? His name, we shouldn't forget it, was Arnaud Beltrame. An ISIS terrorist took hostages in a supermarket, and Arnaud offered to take the place of a young mother. He was killed. He sacrificed himself. His brother said, "He gave his life for someone else, for a stranger."

Which is what Jesus did. Jesus made a decision to have his life be a blessing for all of us. A blessing. A lesson. An example. That idea that Jesus died for us, atoned for us, makes us uneasy. First, we don't like to think we need saving. Second, we don't like to think that somebody died to save us. Part of the problem is when I look out across our congregation, I see nice people. We are nice to our neighbors, to our pets, to our kids. We do our work nicely, we pay our bills, we are good citizens. Why does Jesus need to die to save us? The theological explanation is that the very perfection of God creates a separation between God and even the best of us.

My hero growing up was Ted Williams, the greatest baseball hitter of all time, the greatest Boston Red Sox player ever, a war hero, a fighter pilot, a Hall of Famer. After retirement, he tried to manage the old Washington Senators. It was a disaster. Ted Williams was all about perfection, and he got closer to it than any other player. So he couldn't abide imperfection. He couldn't abide hitters who couldn't hit, pitchers who couldn't pitch, fielders who couldn't field. And above all, he couldn't abide idiots, players who wouldn't try hard, players who were O.K. with their imperfections.

That's sort of God's dilemma: God's perfect, how come you're not? How come you settle for imperfection? The solution for thousands of years, across many religions, has been to make a sacrifice for every imperfection, every oops, every sin, every mistake. You sacrifice something. For centuries it was a "blood sacrifice." A sheep. A cow. A pigeon. Or something else precious to you: produce from your farm, wealth from your earnings, or time.

In Christianity and in many religions, people go on a pilgrimage for a day, a week, a month. They deprive themselves of food, comfort, leisure. They crawl on their knees, they shave their heads, they whip themselves. It's all a way of saying, "God, I'm sorry." We are not all bank robbers, drug addicts, bullies, or mean people. But down deep, if we are honest, if we are humble, we know we are far from perfect. So 2,000 years ago, Jesus stepped in and made one sacrifice for all. No more blood sacrifices, no more guilt offerings. No more guilt, period. A whole new way to do religion.

Last week I preached at Pivot House. You may remember. Pivot House is the drug and alcohol rehab center in Bridgeport, and as part of their rehab they

formed a Gospel choir that sings here three times a year, always a highlight for everybody. These are men whose lives have been broken, totally broken. They've lost everything. Before I got up to preach, they sang a song about "breaking the chains." And as they sang, they held their arms aloft, intertwined, as though bound by chains. They knew what they were singing about. They had been bound up and chained, not only by addiction but also by ego, pride, arrogance, selfishness, spiritual blindness, personal apathy, abuse, violence, hurt of every kind. Bound and chained. But during the song, as they sang about God's love, about Jesus's life, they threw open their arms as if visibly breaking their chains, straining to be free, grabbing the chains, tossing them to the ground. Free at last!

They sang triumphantly:

*"There is power in the name of Jesus
There is power in the name of Jesus
To break every chain, break every chain, break every chain"*

*"There's an army rising up
An army rising up
There's an army rising up
To break every chain, break every chain, break every chain"*

And with a glorious crescendo, they sang,

*"I hear the chains falling
I hear the chains falling"*

That's how the "ugly truth" of the cross, its awful brutality, its human necessity, became truly Good Friday.