

The Forgiving Victim

Luke 23: 33-44

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [[Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."]] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

My heart aches
over the ongoing violence
in our world.

In a world where walls are erected with
barb-wired crowns
to divide us from them;
citizen from stranger,
parent from child.
I ask: where is love?

In a world where a school child learns
how to perform an active shooter drill
before she learns to write or read.
Or a young man's dreams
get flushed down the drain
in the whirlpool of racism's school-to-prison pipeline.
I ask: where is justice?

In a world where 331 transgender lives are blown out too soon,
where love is legislated, and dignity is stripped away,
where the poor are punished,
and killers are the ones who end up making a killing.
I ask: where is God?

It is the age-old question: If God is an almighty being, who is Ruler of all, why is there so much evidence of meaningless violence and suffering in our world?

These are the questions I often hear and ask myself.
Perhaps they are your questions, too.

Meaningless violence and injustice has been around for a very long time. We find Jesus a victim of it. There he is, a poor Palestinian Jew, hanging on a hill that looked like a skull. The lynching ritual is functioning as a both the penalty for an insurrectionist, as well as a stark warning to any sympathizers. The humiliation, the casting lots for his possessions, the crown he wore were all part of the dehumanizing liturgy to make him appear less-than-human. It's a timeless trick: make someone less-than-human and you can justify any kind of violence against them. "Look at your so-called king," they mock Jesus. "He is weak. Sad. A loser." Even the two criminals who hang on his sides have a conversation. "If you have access to God's power, then save yourself...and while you're at it, save us too!" It would be at this climatic moment where, if it were a Bruce Lee movie (or a Kung Fu Panda movie for you youngsters who don't know who Bruce Lee is), Jesus' head would slowly begin to rise, an electricity flashing in his eyes as he taps into God's righteous indignation to crush the ways of injustice once and for all.

But we know what Jesus does instead. He doesn't smear his opponents. He doesn't push a smite button. Instead he forgives his enemies who mock him. He forgives the corrupt systems that put him there. How does he do it? What sense can we make of it?

Maybe we consider looking at forgiveness on the cross through three perspectives. Like looking through a prism to get three different angles. Through the first angle, the cross reminds us that forgiveness is at the center God's heart. Dare I say it is the deepest dimension of love itself—a love that extends to both oppressor and oppressed, friend and enemy, stranger and citizen. From the covenant rainbow after the flood to the trauma Jesus endures on the cross, God's mercy is everlasting to everlasting. God offers us forgiveness before we even think about asking for it. We are familiar with this angle, yes?

Through another side of the prism, the cross tells us that God has nothing to do with violence. On the cross Jesus absorbs the violence and does not return it. He ends the cycle. It is a cycle we see everywhere. If we were to attend a Trump rally, it would not take long before Hillary's name gets dropped and the crowd begins their chant: "Lock her up! Lock her up!" It's the same mob mentality that chanted, "Crucify him!" in Jesus' day. But it doesn't end there. Go to a Bernie Sanders rally instead and, when Trump's name eventually gets dropped, the crowd yells in return, "Lock him up! Lock him up!" The cycle continues. Back and forth we go...

So on the cross it becomes clear that God wants nothing to do with the cycle of violence. All the stories we read about God ordaining genocide toward the Canaanites and commanding laws that permit violence against others who break them, perhaps they are not projections of God's desire after all. Instead, they are projections of our own tendencies toward violence which we justify by using God's name. The second angle of the mystery of the cross is that God wants nothing to do with violence and death's

instruments. God is the God of abundant life. The violence problem? Well, that part is on us.

Which brings us to the most important angle of the prism for us to consider: on the cross Jesus forgives, not only because it is God's heart; not only because God has nothing to do with violence; but also so that in the light of being forgiven, we come to see what we are doing to each other and then commit to stopping the cycle ourselves.

You may recall the case in Texas where a female officer, after a long shift, walked into the wrong apartment. After mistaking it for her own, she shot and killed Bothom Jean—an African American man who was sitting in his apartment eating ice cream. After the officer was convicted and sentenced to ten years, Bothom Jean's brother walked up to the defendant and gave her a hug as an act of forgiveness. While I am in awe of his coming to peace with the fact that the past cannot be any different, I cannot use his act of forgiveness to make myself feel better about the racial injustice which put Bothom's body into the ground. The sensationalism of the hug shifted the conversation from another poignant example of racial injustice, to being comforted by the forgiveness hug.

When Jesus forgives us, he is not doing it so we feel better about our violence toward one another. He is not letting us off the hook so the injustices continue. Rather, he is holding up a mirror, which in the light of being forgiven exposes the truth of what we've done and are doing, and then transforms us into instruments who commit to the work of doing something about it. Without working toward justice, forgiveness is nothing more than an empty gesture we use to comfort ourselves about the injustices in the world. At the same time, without extending forgiveness, we will more than likely find ourselves continuing the cycle of violence which created the injustice in the first place.

Some might remember the horrible tragedy which occurred in 1963, at 16th Street Baptist church in Birmingham, Alabama. It was where five African-American children were getting ready for church, tying sashes around one another's waists and preparing for worship, when a bomb detonated killing four of them. The bomb was from four male members of the Klan. One of the men was not prosecuted for fifteen years. Two were finally prosecuted almost forty years later. One died without ever seeing a courtroom. I ask: Where is God's justice? Today, in memory of the event, there is a stain-glass window of a black crucified Christ. As he hangs on the cross, one of his arms is pushing away hatred. The other hand remains open, extending forgiveness.

This is the tension we live in as people of faith. We stand firm against injustice with one hand, while extending forgiveness with the other.

God's power is not like the power we often seek or desire. God's power is mercy and forgiveness, and a love that stands firm against hatred and injustice. We are multipliers of this power. We are mirror reflections of this love. May it be so. May. It. Be. So.