

Love Does Not Store Up Grievances

A Palm Sunday sermon, with readings from Luke 19:28-40 and Philipians 2:5-11

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It's not uncommon for churches to commemorate Holy Week by presenting the Passion story in dramatic form. I always do a double take at this time of year when I see advertisements in the Citizen picturing Jesus on the cross and announcing, in large letters, "The Crucifixion!" And then below, in smaller letters, "Free Parking. Four presentations. Childcare provided".

One church that put on an Easter pageant assigned people in the community to play the various parts, and because it was a small community the character of Jesus fell to a somewhat unlikely person--a big, burly, barroom brawler! But everyone got into the spirit of things, and after several weeks of rehearsals it was time for the real thing! When they came to the part of the play where Jesus is led away to be crucified, one man, filling in as a part of the crowd, got so caught up in the emotion of the drama that he joined rather enthusiastically in the shouts of "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Then, in the midst of shouting insults at the top of his lungs, he accidentally sprayed some spittle in the face of the character playing Jesus. The Jesus fill-in, carrying a cross on his back, stopped in his tracks, reached up, wiped his face dry, pointed at the excitable man and said, "I'll be back to take care of you after the resurrection."

We Understand the Retaliatory Impulse

I understand the impulse to respond to nasty behaviour in this way. I like to watch the television series, Law and Order, because it deals intelligently with issues of crime and punishment and never bothers to tidy up things at the end of the show. However, I also confess that I cheer inwardly when the perpetrator of a crime is apprehended and receives his or her due! At its best, it is a yearning for justice; at worst, it appeals to our vindictiveness and a naked need for revenge.

Whatever it is, I would have understood if Jesus, with the euphoria of the palm parade behind him, would have reacted a little more jauntily to those who taunted and mistreated him on his way to the cross. When the members of the Sanhedrin, in a show of unusual unanimity voted against him and sentenced him to death (Mark 14:64), part of me wants Jesus to stand up and shout, in typical courtroom fashion, "I object!"

When the court proceedings began to unravel and some of the clerks began to abuse their power, spitting on him, blindfolding him, hitting him, slapping him, and taunting him with guessing games (Mark 14:65), I would have understood if, in Arnold Schwarzenegger fashion, Jesus would have said, "I'll be back! To take care of you after the resurrection!"

Julius Caesar would have understood, as would all of the little caesars who have followed in his wake. At one point early in Julius Caesar's political career, feelings against him were so intense that he thought it best to leave Rome. He sailed for the Aegean island of Rhodes, but en route the ship was attacked by pirates and Caesar was captured! The pirates demanded a ransom of 12,000 gold pieces, and Caesar's staff was sent away to arrange the payment. Caesar spent almost 40 days with his captors, jokingly telling them that he would someday capture and crucify them to a man! The kidnappers were greatly amused by his bravado, but when the ransom was paid and Caesar was freed, the first thing he did was gather a fleet and pursue his captors, who were themselves captured and crucified ... to a man!

When Simon Peter denied any association with Jesus, and Judas used his association for nefarious ends, I'd like to tell them, "We'll take care of this later!" However, the denial and betrayal of close associates are but two of many incidents. The humiliation of Jesus is relentless and complete. In a curious political coalition, Pilate becomes party to Jesus' crucifixion. Soldiers dress him in a purple robe and a crown of thorns, salute him, and shout derisively, "Long live the King of the Jews!" They beat him on the head with a stick, spit on him, and fall on their knees and bow before him in mock worship.

I'd like to say, "He'll be back to take care of you after the resurrection," but the New Testament says that love "does not...store up grievances." (1 Corinthians 13:5, JER) In one short week Jesus could have saved up a small mountain of grievances, yet through the abasement, the humiliation, the kangaroo court appearances and the political manoeuvring that employed all manner of treachery--through it all Jesus responds with dignified silence.

A grievance is defined as "a resentment strong enough to justify retaliation," and Wilma Derksen, a Mennonite from Winnipeg whose story of her 13-year-old daughter's murder in 1984 was most recently told in the February issue of *Chatelaine*, understands the retaliatory impulse very well. It took a while to find the body of her daughter, and even months after Candace's body was found, when a friend asked her what it would take to feel justice had been done Wilma replied that not only would she want Candace's killer to die, she wanted ten child murderers to die! She imagined them up against a wall, and still feeling no satisfaction, she added, "I would have to pull the trigger.' And in my mind's eye I did pull it, 10 times, and saw them fall and it was delicious. And I was horrified, thinking, 'I'm a Mennonite! And I have such incredible violence.'" (Marianne Meed Ward, "A mother's mercy," *Chatelaine*, February, 2001)

The Invitation to Empty Ourselves

The first Christians, reflecting on the life and death of Jesus, including the vivid details of his suffering and agony, composed a song about it. Strange people! The song, sometimes called the Kenosis Hymn, from the Greek word for "empty," is found in the New Testament, in *Philippians*, chapter 2. It tells us that "Jesus, ...though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself...." (*Philippians* 2:5-7) Other translations read:

"...of his own free will he gave up all he had...." (TEV)

"(He) made himself of no reputation...." (KJV)

"(He) stripped himself of every advantage...." (PHL)

Instead of seizing those moments when his power could have at least equaled that of his taunting opponents, Jesus refused to take the advantage. What a splendid opportunity the triumphal entry gave Jesus for an inflammatory speech ... but he said nothing. What a marvelous opportunity the trial gave him to confound and defy his accusers ... but Jesus chose to be silent. What a splendid opportunity to mobilize the masses early on, when, feeding 5,000 people, they responded by wanting to make him king! And when Jesus realized their intent, he retreated to the solitude of the hills.

Jesus divested himself of opportunities to seize power and to seek revenge. The implicit contrast, elaborated upon by Paul elsewhere in the New Testament (Romans 5), is with the story of Adam and Eve. Unlike the primordial couple, who presumptuously thought equality with God a thing to be grasped, Jesus refused to clutch at it. Adam and Eve chose disobedience; Jesus chose humble obedience, and accepted his death, on a cross.

The story of Christ's passion is a story of diminishing power, but a diminution of power freely chosen, and vividly displayed on other occasions, most notably in his washing of the disciples' feet. The hymn in Philippians 2 makes clear that the lordship of Jesus was borne, not of power grasped, but of service humbly and freely offered. Jesus' manner of living and his manner of dying taught his disciples, in the words of Malcolm Muggeridge, "...that whatsoever was arrogant, assertive, dogmatic or demagogic belonged to the gospel of power, not to his gospel of love (and it taught them) that humility is not just virtuous but the very condition of all virtue...." (Jesus, page 151)

Unlike other powerful, charismatic figures, Jesus was never "full of himself." He cultivated a spiritual freedom from many of the things that weigh us down--the weights of ego, self-importance, insecurity, bigotry, fear, distrust. He "emptied" himself of these things, and asks us to cultivate a like spirit, asking us...

* to go the extra mile...

* to turn the other cheek...

* to give away your coat, and your cloak also...

* to cross the road to help when others have walked by doing their best to ignore human suffering...

* to forgive seventy times, and then seven more...

Wilma Derksen's journey, subsequent to her daughter's murder, has taken her through a lot of work with victims of crime and with prisoners, and twelve years after Candace's murder she found herself at the Stony Mountain penitentiary in a room with ten prisoners, and it was only later, when she realized there had been ten murderers in that room that the full significance of it hit her. Here she was reaching out to ten murderers, but with mercy rather than the vengeance she had imagined years earlier. The writer of the Chatelaine article concludes by saying, "I'm struck by the beauty of it. She enters prisons knowing that any day she could be facing the man who killed her daughter--and she extends grace. She exudes peace and healing, not anger, grief and bitterness. If she can do that, after all the pain she's endured, surely I can for all the lesser injuries I've endured." (Marianne Meed Ward)

In response to slights and injuries suffered I may think, "I've a mind to do this and that," but the Scriptures say, "Have this "mind...in you that was in Christ Jesus." (Philippians

2:5, KJV) Paul, in his preface to the kenosis hymn, says, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus..." (Philippians 2:5) In other words, his behaviour through the Passion is not intended as a show, something for us to admire once a year; it has a direct application to us. And Jesus will be back after the resurrection to see how we've done.

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.