

Via Dolorosa: Tears for the City

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Luke 19:37-44

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This is a true story, passed on to me this week by a minister friend in Chicago. Recently her church received three new members, including a woman being baptized. Her name is Ronnie; she's in her late 40s, a tough-on-the-outside, soft-on-the-inside kind of woman. She'll admit she's made mistakes in her life, but she's also received a fair amount of bad breaks. She told my friend that she was afraid to join the church because she couldn't understand how Jesus can forgive her for all the times she messed up. But at last, Ronnie decided she was ready. She joked that no one should stand near her when she came forward to be baptized, in case lightning struck the chancel. On that Sunday, as she knelt by the baptism font and the words of the sacrament were spoken, she was visibly nervous. The water was poured on her head in the name of the Triune God. And then Ronnie reached up, wiped her face from the water and the tears, and said gently but loud enough for everyone to hear, "I'm found."

Today is Palm Sunday, the day of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But the gospel passage for today contains a stark contrast: although Jesus rode before a cheering crowd, he stopped and openly wept over the city of Jerusalem. He wasn't mourning his own fate as he approached the place that would reject and crucify him; Jesus wept over the city itself: "O Jerusalem, if you, even you, recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes." What are the things that make for peace and are they still hidden from our eyes today? Is Jesus still weeping?

The temptation at this point is to fill up this sermon with history lessons. Jerusalem, the city of David, had known destruction before. The temple Solomon built stood for over 300 years until the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem in the 6th century BC, flattening the city and taking their king and all their leaders into exile. The prophet Jeremiah wept over the city, calling the people foolish ones "who have eyes, but do not see, who have ears but do not hear" (Jer 5:21). When Jesus wept over Jerusalem, he did so as a prophet after the tradition of the prophets of old. That is why his words have such an ominous, Old Testament ring to them.

The city of Jerusalem would eventually be rebuilt. But for 500 years the people were never free; and in the time of Jesus, the land was oppressed under the yoke of Roman rule. Some believed they would be safe by adopting the ways of the Roman culture. Other Zealots took the opposite approach of guerrilla warfare. Jesus wept, because neither violence nor cultural accommodation would bring them true peace. And in the year 70 AD, Titus, the Roman general, would do all the things Jesus prophesied: put up embankments and build a siege wall around the city, inflict disease and starvation on those who remained inside, line the streets with crucifixion crosses for those who tried

to escape. The city would be ransacked and flattened; no stone left upon another except for three towers preserved as a grim witness to any who doubted the might of the Roman Empire. Oh that they had recognized the things that made for peace, but they were hidden from their eyes. And Jesus wept.

What is hidden in plain sight today, prompting Jesus' tears over us and our cities? What are we not seeing? Consider these thought experiments. Every morning we open our eyes and assume that we'll have reasonable access to food, water, and electricity. We know that there are lots of places in the world where people can't turn on a faucet for clean water or flick a switch for lights. We are sorry about what they lack; we pray that God looks out for them; but mostly we go about our own way.

Second, on Sundays we gather in this church and our assumption is that we are surrounded by friends. Yet what if we lived in a land that forbade people to worship the Christian God? It does happen. There have been people martyred for their faith, and millions today risk torture, banishment and even death because of their Christian faith. We are sorry for their persecution; we pray God looks out for them, but mostly we go on our own way.

Third, we wake up each day assuming that we exist in a nation that is safe. The newspaper headlines about Baghdad and Kabul remind us that we've been at war for five long years. But we don't feel personally threatened. There are no tanks rumbling down our streets, no air raid sirens, no siege walls being erected around the perimeter of Pittsburgh. We know that others now pay the heavy costs of war. Men are slaughtered, women raped, children forced to flee or take up arms as child soldiers. We grieve these details, yet they're not our details. We pray God looks out for them, but their story isn't our story and mostly we go on our own way.

We assume each morning that we'll have food, water and shelter, but what if we didn't have those things? We assume we can worship freely among friends, but what if we couldn't? We assume our nation is not being seriously threatened, but what if it were? Are our assumptions blinding us to the real message of our faith?

Side note #1: Do you know what the full title of Darwin's Origin of Species actually was? When it was first published in 1859, it was called: On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life. Do we assume as Americans we are a favored race? And are we only faithful so long as we're favored?

Jesus wept over the city, over our city. Tears prompted by sin, violence, disobedience, indifference, brokenness, idolatry. Today are we not recognizing the things that make for peace because we place a higher priority upon the things that make for privilege, for comfort and stability even if all the rest of the world is forced to do without such things?

Side note #2: Are any of you struck as I am with the irony around the recent events in New York? How Elliot Spitzer, the former attorney general and crusader for legal justice with 20-20 vision was forced to resign from office to be replaced by Lt. Governor David

Paterson, a man who's legally blind and yet hopefully possessing, we pray, a clearer vision of right from wrong?

I keep hearing Jesus' comments about "the things that make for peace," things so obvious they are right in front of us, yet for some reason they are hidden from our eyes. I want to grab hold of those things. I want to list them off and make it plain from this pulpit. But when I try to put them into words, it all becomes muddled and complicated. The bottom line is this: Jesus wasn't crucified because he fed the hungry, cared for the sick, and did nice things for others. He was crucified because he called into question how others perceived and lived out their lives in relationship to God and with one another. He challenged their assumptions.¹ He called them hypocrites; he made them uncomfortable.

And he got political. The choices being made by the Pharisees and Zealots and most everyone else in that crowd on Palm Sunday mattered, but they were leading toward the destruction of Jerusalem. So Jesus wept. The choices we will make in our primary election matter. (And if you're not registered to vote, you've only got 8 days to mail in a registration form.) Whether you're for Obama, Clinton or McCain, it matters. When the gospel challenges racism and class privilege and we don't listen, it matters. When the gospel speaks out against unchecked greed and unrestrained capitalism and we don't listen, it matters. When the gospel demands for compassion and justice don't take priority over our comfort and desire for quick fixes, it matters. Jesus weeps over our city. Yet when I try to list off all the things that make for peace (peace with God and one another), it gets too overwhelming. It's supposed to be simple, supposed to be something visible right before our very eyes.

And then I remember the story of Ronnie. Her assumptions told her she was not worthy to be baptized as a follower of Christ. But Christ's love, and the expression of that love in a pastor and accepting congregation of believers, changed that assumption. Through eyes washed with baptism water and tears, Ronnie could say "I'm found." That is the good news for Ronnie, and for each one of us. Whatever voice might tell you that you're unworthy to receive baptism, communion, or leadership in a church, Christ's voice is truer and stronger and anxiously calling out to you this day. And such is the thing that makes for true peace.

Whatever assumption that might convince you that you cannot be baptized, or heaven forbid, that someone else cannot be baptized, Jesus challenges that. Whatever assumption suggests that your or my status is more favored than someone else, more highly exalted in the eyes of God than someone else, Jesus challenges that. And whatever way we put into practice a version of those assumptions, personally, congregationally, politically, militarily, Jesus weeps and says, "On that they recognized this day the things that make for peace!"

Yet Ronnie still comes forward and is washed and says, "I'm found." We come forward and take no note of who kneels beside us except to know they too are a child of God. And in that good news, tears of a different kind are shed. No longer are the things that

make for peace and hope and joy hidden from our eyes. And believe me, if we're silent about this good news, the very stones will shout out. Thanks be to God!

¹ Cf. "Preparing for Good Friday," Dr. James Mayfield, Tarrytown United Methodist Church; April 13, 2003.

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