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November 24, 2019  
Luke 23:33-43  
What Love Can Do

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be reflections of your word to us this morning, in Christ Jesus, we pray, Amen.

This is a surprising text for November. Unless we study the lectionary, we don't see the crucifixion of Jesus coming with Advent just around the corner. Many of the images of Jesus associated with Reign of Christ Sunday have him in a seated portrait, looking very serene indeed. This one (bulletin) spoke more to me of what I think Jesus represents on this day . . . it's gritty . . . it's real . . . he is still divine, human and he is present in the division, in the danger and unimaginable circumstances we humans find ourselves living. It's hard to tell if he is trapped within the fence or someone is trying to keep him out. Either way, he is here. This is the kind of king Luke's gospel proclaims.

I was studying the scripture this week and did an exercise I learned from the Jesuits. I read the story of Jesus' crucifixion several times through, noting the flow of action, the characters, dialogue, etc. Then I put my Bible down and imagined the story. I watched as they stood the cross up with Jesus on it, with the various people calling out to him from below; the one criminal joining them, and the other criminal rebuking the first. In my mind's eye, Jesus watches as the action goes on around him. He has no response as people are calling out to him, but almost holds space for them to express themselves.

As we watch, it's easy to vilify those taunting Jesus. But Jesus knows they aren't evil. They're broken and they're completely shut off and disconnected from who Jesus is and the message he brings. We humans come by our brokenness honestly. We have life long wounds from childhood; we learn to live with them and even find healing from them along the way. We experience traumas, make mistakes, endure losses, experience challenges. As the years unfold, we somehow find ourselves in the same

kinds of situations over and over again. And we experience things that trigger feelings & reactions, things that trigger our trauma.

Those bullying Jesus on the cross are surely reacting to their own stuff: perhaps their feelings of disappointment . . . perhaps they're acting out their anger at Jesus for challenging them, or perhaps in feeling inferior to Jesus, with him hanging on the cross, humiliated, they try to puff themselves up. After all, what can Jesus do? Nothing. That is, nothing visible with human eyes.

As they fit the cross carrying Jesus into place, Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." He does not ask forgiveness for sin, rather for their ignorance. The political and religious leaders resist Jesus; they don't like him, because in his very presence they are confronted with themselves. Along with many others, they are not ready for Jesus' message and their response is violence and control. Jesus' response is forgiveness. "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." This line is not present in the original text; it was added later because it is beautifully consistent with the way Jesus is represented in the Luke-Acts narrative . . . people began adding it to manuscripts and readers loved it. Forgiveness . . . for those who are not ready for Jesus.

On the cross, Jesus endures it. He endures it all . . . he absorbs everything they throw at him, even crucifixion itself. The last thing he can offer them is to be with them in their agony in a posture of forgiveness. He stands with all of them . . . figuratively . . . all of the leaders who struggle to be in their own skin in Jesus' presence . . . all of the people who weep silently, grieving his loss . . . all of the people who put their hope in Jesus the King are now again without hope . . . he stands with all of them.

I help with these horses in my neighbourhood, one of whom is completely attached to the other. We've been going through this exercise of separating them. We literally create meters of distance between them and then take the unattached one out of sight for a minute at a time. During that minute the attached horse begins to circle around the handler, calling out, tightening her body like a ball of energy, trotting in place, rearing and threatening to kick the handler. The goal is for her to be in the feelings that arise when her friend is gone and have the experience of not dying. We are challenging her

to feel . . . you see, without her horse friend, the attached horse is left only with herself, her fears and anxiety after a lifetime of human neglect and probable abuse. She blames the handler for her feelings, she is terrified to feel them, she doesn't think she'll survive. The handler's job is to maintain good safe boundaries and simply be with her as she experiences not dying. And, when a minute is over, her friend comes back into view and she realizes she has survived. Her handler, having been on the receiving end of her threats and insults, continues to see her, be with her, and offer her nothing but love and compassion.

The only person who sees Jesus in this snapshot of his story is one of the convicted men also being crucified. In his rebuke, of the other, he exhibits attributes of a disciple and asks to enter God's kingdom. (pause) In the place called the Skull, where there is no shred of evidence such a kingdom exists or will ever exist, he asks nonetheless. Somehow the convicted man found a way to see the salvation that intrudes into the absolutely hopeless moment where no one is saved from suffering and death . . . which is also exactly the moment when salvation breaks through.<sup>1</sup> The man on the cross somehow can see that something else exists.

Jesus talked about forgiveness and the kingdom of God more than anything else during his ministry. The kingdom of God is like a son who goes off and squanders his inheritance, only to come back, embraced by his father's love. The kingdom of God is like a shepherd who, noticing one is lost, leaves the rest and searches until the one is found. The kingdom of God is like a man who throws a party and when all his rich friends are too busy, he invites the poor, the blind, and the lame to be part of the feast. The stories go on and on. The kingdom of God happens – I'm intentional with my words here, because the kingdom of God is everywhere, but it takes manifesting – the kingdom of God happens where love is embraced, where forgiveness is practised, where justice is done, where we stop to see each other, where we embrace each other in our brokenness and vulnerability. And Christ is present,

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<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word, Year C vol 4, p. 337

standing at whatever the barbed wire fence represents for us . . . for some it is literal. Christ is present, holding space for the kingdom to be manifest. This is what love can do.