

The Church of the Good Shepherd

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Good Friday – April 19, 2019

John 18:1-19:42

Holy Spirit of God, may the refining fire of your love reach into our hidden, inmost places and make us one spirit with you. Amen.

Holy Week is a time for storytelling. The stories we remember and re-live during this week are the foundational stories of our faith. They are the stories upon which the arc of the narrative of God's work of salvation through the person of Jesus pivots. And today, Good Friday, this is especially true.

In keeping with this theme, I am going to tell you three stories. Like all narratives that reveal great truth, they are incomplete, and you may be left with more questions than answers. I will tell these stories as three acts of one larger story – the greatest story of them all. The story of beauty and redeeming love found amid human brokenness.

Act one – The sacrifice of a young man

Last month, there was a shocking murder of a 16-year old Fairfax County resident and student at Falls Church High School. Five young men (including one teenager) have been charged with the murder. They are all members of an MS-13 “clique”, as was the victim, Jacson Pineda Chicas. Jacson's mother says that as a child he had been forced to join the gang in El Salvador, and that they fled the country for the U.S. trying to escape MS-13. But Jacson had been unable to escape the gang's grip in America.

His mother said that every day Jacson would leave the house in fear and that gang members pursued and threatened him. She said Jacson was trying to leave the gang and he even started living at a house in Prince George's County to spare his family from danger. She told reporters that when gang members previously accused Jacson of talking to police they threatened to kill his family and he told them to kill himself instead.

Imagine that. A sixteen-year old boy – well, really a man – offering himself to be killed to spare his family. Sadly, that is exactly what happened. Jacson and several other members of the clique went to a meeting at the leader's house on March 8. During the meeting, the gang members attacked and killed Jacson, stabbing him repeatedly. They then drove his body to Stafford County where they left it and set it on fire.

Horrors such as these occur all around us. We do not know if Jacson's sacrifice will ultimately save his family from the threatened dangers of MS-13. We do not know if Jacson's death will redeem anyone... not the least of which Jacson himself. We do not know just how innocent Jacson is in this whole dirty business. But we do know that he was a boy who grew up in a dangerous system dominated by violent gangs and that he had died a young man who tried to protect those he loved by offering himself to be killed.

Sometimes grand stories of great sacrifice are hard for us to identify with. We should not place Jacson Chicas on a pedestal alongside Jesus, marking him as a sacrificial lamb, nor should we write off what happened to him as merely the consequences of getting involved in a dangerous gang. Real stories are more complicated than that. Perhaps we can, however, glean from Jacson's story a glimpse of what Jesus' sacrifice can look like in human scale.

Jesus' suffering and death at the hands of broken and sinful humans for the salvation of all creation is not just an event that happened one time in history. In some way, fragments of this sort of salvific life are lived out again and again through all of us. It seems that maybe it wasn't just that Jesus died because of our sinfulness and for our salvation, but that we all – each one of us – have opportunities to live this truth of sacrificial love in our lives as well. And when we do – when we

participate in Christ's action of sacrificial love – we also participate in Christ's redeeming work of all creation.

Act two – A parishioner asks the ultimate question

I recently visited a parishioner in the hospital, who, for the purposes of this story, I will call Susan. When I entered the hospital room, Susan had just taken strong pain medication. She was tired from an extraordinarily hard few weeks but was fairly clear headed and lucid when our visit began. I chatted with her about what had been going on at church and talked about plans for Palm Sunday. Susan then surprised me when she said that she never attended church on Palm Sunday because it was too hard to be part of the congregation when they all cry, "Crucify him!" during the reading of the Passion Narrative.

Looking into her eyes, I could see her deep distress. She said that she just couldn't stand to hear it and could never say it herself. I thought about this for a moment and then responded that maybe this exercise wasn't meant for her, since she clearly got the emotional point. Rather it was for the rest of us who may be a bit more hard-hearted and manage to maintain emotional distance from the story. I said that most of us instead allow ourselves to judge the crowd as evil, while we, on the other hand, would certainly have known better. We like to think that we would never shout to have Jesus crucified, but the truth is that we did, and we would most likely do the same thing again if given the opportunity. Human nature hasn't changed that much.

Pain medication now kicking in and loosening her inhibitions, Susan then grasped my hand and said that there was something she never understood. Her eyes began to fill with tears as she looked at me and asked with great intensity, "*Why would God kill his own son?*"

Boom... just like that, she asked one of the biggest questions in Christian theology. And she wasn't just wondering for the sake of theological argument; Susan was deeply distressed by this question. It clearly was one that had been haunting her soul for a long time – maybe for all time.

Why would God kill his own son? This question gives birth to other questions that Susan didn't ask but perhaps had pondered on those dark nights of the soul. If God would kill his most beloved son, what does that mean for us to be made children of God? What does this say about our creator that God would kill his son? Did God kill Jesus or merely allow him to be killed by others – and is there a difference, really, between the two? What, ultimately, do I do with this sacrifice? And how can I trust in a god who would do this?

I imagine many of us have pondered similar questions as we wrestle with this foundational Christian story. In the end, the only answer I had for Susan was my own flawed and incomplete theology. It was my personal answer – worked out with fear and trembling through my life experience of God's love and forgiveness. And, ultimately, she will have to reconcile this question with her own life experience. Since I do not believe that God will intervene over and against our divinely-given free will, God did not kill his son, however God also did not intervene to prevent us from doing so. And it was people much like us that killed Jesus, not the "Jews" as Christians have blamed over the millennia (not the Pharisees, not the Temple leaders) but us – broken, sinful, fallible humans who loved *and feared* Jesus.

What is amazing to me is that, while I know this to be true (know it deep within my being), I also know to be true that God loves us completely. Loves us not merely in spite of our weakness and brokenness but maybe even because of it. That the story of God's work of salvation through Christ doesn't end with Jesus' death proves this true. Somehow, from our very human and broken lives, God's love brings forth new life. God reveals our beauty amid our brokenness.

Act three – Broken pots mended with gold

The last story I leave with you is not really a story at all, rather an image that will perhaps tie the other stories together. Recently I learned of Kintsugi, the Japanese art of mending broken pottery with lacquer mixed with gold. Known as the "golden repair", kintsugi also represents a

philosophy in that it treats breakage and repair as a valuable part of the history of an object, not merely something to disguise. Rather than hiding the threads of repair, they are instead highlighted and exalted with precious gold, veining the mended pottery with strength and unique and extraordinary beauty. This method embraces the inevitable flaws and imperfections, and repairs what had been broken into a new creation even more beautiful than before.

This Holy Week, I carry the image of kintsugi pottery in my heart. I think that we are all like this, in a way. We are all like these exquisite, unique, gold-laced pots – continually being broken but then mended and knit together by God’s love. This is how God sees us and loves us into wholeness. How would this world be different if we all saw each other this way as well? Someone once wrote, “when wounds are healed by love, the scars are beautiful.” Maybe this is the good news of Good Friday.

Amen.