

WHAT DID WE DO TO DESERVE THIS?

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Psalm 22

Mark 14:17-15:47

A few years back, I tripped, fell and broke my leg. As I sat there in the street, trying to comfort my then 3-year-old granddaughter, whom I had taken down with me, I tried to figure out if she was tall enough to reach the doorbell and get my husband to come to the rescue. It was the Saturday before Thanksgiving, so I was also thinking about the shopping that needed to be done and the pies that had to be baked. And amidst all those racing thoughts, one that kept surfacing was, “What did I do to deserve this?”

It is a question we ask when illness strikes or a windstorm brings a tree through the roof. We are logical people and we want some logical explanation for the bad things that happen to us, or to others. There is a story of Jesus and his disciples encountering a blind man one day and they ask Jesus, “Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” And there it is, the assumption that someone has to be blamed when a terrible thing happens.

It is the question that is raised by the events we remember tonight. The Jesus we know through scripture was a good man, patient, gracious, generous, caring. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, paid attention to children, reached out across social and religious barriers with compassion. Why did he have to suffer and die? What did he do to deserve this horror?

Through the years, theologians have offered many answers. But probably the one that we hear most frequently is often referred to as substitutionary atonement, in which God’s forgiveness is contingent upon an innocent person, a human of infinite worth, being punished for the sins of all of us. Jesus had to suffer and die in order to satisfy God’s justice, God’s demand that sin be punished, God’s anger that had to be appeased. To put it another way—we sin against our neighbors and against God and therefore deserve death, but Jesus died for us to pacify God. Barbara Brown Taylor describes this theory as an angry God keeping a ledger containing everyone’s name followed by a list of all our debts. Every time God inscribes another sin, he says, “Someone is going to have hell to pay for this.” And then Jesus volunteered to pay.¹ In his death, Jesus did for us what we can never do for ourselves.

I have struggled with this understanding of Jesus’ suffering and death because it makes God seem like an angry, demanding parent, one who uses violence against his own Son to accomplish our salvation. And this seems to me to be counter to all that Jesus tried to tell us about God in his teaching and healing, and showed us about God in the very life he lived. “God loved the world,” Jesus said. And again, he taught that God is like the father who forgave the prodigal son, embraced and kissed him, before the son even asked for forgiveness. We believe that Jesus is not separate from God, but is part of the life of God, so the suffering and death of Jesus are not something God does to Jesus or even allows to happen to Jesus. Jesus’ suffering is God’s suffering.

Now if that is true, then it causes me to look at Jesus’ passion differently. I want to tell you a story that I think points to a different understanding. It is a true story that I read years ago in a newspaper. Sadly, I cannot find the original story, so no names or places or dates. It is a story of a father whose son was murdered and the man who committed the murder. The father, of course, was devastated and, I imagine, felt anger, rage, despair, grief, a whole list of feelings that the violent, senseless death of a child surely triggers. Over time, however, the father felt the need to meet his son’s murderer, who had been arrested, convicted and sent to prison. So the father went to the prison and met the other man and not just once, but over time,

often. I don't recall that the newspaper story said how it happened, but the father came to forgive the killer. Certainly the guilty man had done nothing to deserve forgiveness. It was a hard, sacrificial thing for the father to do. He had to give up his anger and the need for revenge. He had to take his grief onto his own shoulders and to stop laying it on the man who was the source of that grief. And he also lost his marriage. His wife, the mother of the murdered son, could not forgive the murderer, and she could not forgive her husband for forgiving him.

Forgiveness is costly; it does not come easily; it bears the cost of human brokenness. Pastor Martha Tatarnic writes that, forgiveness, "in contrast to our instincts for self-promotion and self-preservation [is] the senseless, breathtaking capacity for us to pour out our own lives for the sake of saving another's life or making a new kind of world possible."ⁱⁱ The father who forgave his son's murderer, gave the other man the opportunity for a new life, the gift of freedom from the burden of guilt, a new relationship with someone who knew the worst thing he had done, yet was willing to care about him.

If we, who are human are sometimes able to forgive and to bear the cost of that forgiveness, then surely the God of love does more so. The whole story of Jesus' passion is one of bitter rejection, shame, mockery, pain and death. That was the cost of forgiving those who were responsible for administering all that agony. It was the cost of forgiving those didn't know what they were doing then and the cost of forgiving us who still may not know what we are doing to hurt him now. When we read and hear again the story of Jesus' suffering and death, I believe what we see there is the fierce, determined, vulnerable love of God who is paying the price of forgiving us, all that stands between us and God. It is the agony of God who is willing to descend into hell with us. There on the cross is God paying the cost of our brokenness; there is the love that will not let us go; love that seeks us out in all the places where we get lost or stuck or willfully go off track; love that knows us fully, comes to us in whatever prison cells we have fashioned for ourselves, and offers us new life. In the passion of Jesus, we see the vastness of God's open-handed love and who God really is.

Now the Christian church has never called an official ecumenical council to settle this question of the meaning of the cross, as it has with regard to other key doctrinal matters. On the contrary, our ancestors deemed it wise to keep the mystery of the cross open to various interpretations, no single one of which has the corner on the truth.

So I can't say how you might understand and respond tonight as we stand at the foot of the cross and hear this old story. It might be with repentance or sorrow, gratitude or relief. It might be that you will avert your gaze from it all. But if you find yourself receiving the story of God's fierce, resolute, sacrificial love, if you feel upended by God's forgiveness, if hearing it again makes you ask, "What did I do to deserve this?" then perhaps, for this night at least, the response might best be our awed and humbled silence.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 19980, np.61-62.

ⁱⁱ Martha Tatarnic, "When Love Looks Like Sacrifice," *Christian Century*, March 24, 2021, p. 27.