

## **Seven Last Words**

**Trinity United Church, Nanaimo BC**

**April 14 2017**

**It's a gift to be with you friends on this Good Friday. It's a strange day to call "good." On this day, the leader of a new Jewish movement was betrayed by one of his own, condemned in a mock show trial, strung up and executed by religious and imperial authorities and left in a tomb. Now that's a strange thing to call "good."**

**Why do we?**

**Because there is no church without this. There is no life without this. This murder makes our salvation. And that's the deepest mystery there is. So on Good Friday the church gathers to wonder about this mystery. A mystery is different from a puzzle. With a puzzle, you figure it out and you're done. No one keeps completed crosswords. But a mystery is something that the more you know about it, the more there is to know, and to love. So if a puzzle is like Sudoku or a Rubix Cube a mystery is like the face of someone you love. The more you know, the more you want to, and the more you love.<sup>i</sup>**

**The face of the one we love today is long, full of sorrow, bruised. And yet he looks at us with love. And not only at us, but at all creatures.**

**The image in front of you is carved from a bullet. It was made by a Christian artist in Damascus, Syria, one of the most troubled places in the world at the moment, enemies without and within, nowhere safe to turn, tens of millions of displaced people, many reaching as far as here, the west coast of Canada. What the artist is saying is clear I think. That**

**what human beings intend for violence—a piece of metal meant to kill—  
God can turn into peace, a symbol of the healing of the world. So watch  
and listen this Good Friday and see whether what we human beings  
mean for ill God can turn into healing. Not just for us but for every  
particle in creation.**

*I “Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are  
doing’.” Luke 23:34*

**The image you see is from Coventry, England. During the Nazi blitz  
against Great Britain this magnificent medieval cathedral was destroyed.  
The next day in the rubble a worker found these wooden beams, nearly  
1000 years old, charred into the shape of a cross. When they rebuilt, they  
left the shell of the old cathedral as a monument of devastation and as  
you can see emblazoned the words “Father, forgive.”**

**And this may be the oddest thing we have to say on this very odd  
day. That as Jesus was betrayed by his friends, denounced by his  
religious leaders, undone by his government, he forgave each one of  
them. It may not shock you to learn that some ancient manuscripts of the  
bible leave this verse out. The copyists couldn’t bring themselves to  
believe that Jesus’ mercy was that deep. In the middle ages when  
Christianity was required by law, some Christians would leave Good  
Friday services and go look for Jews to beat up and synagogues to burn  
down. It seems to me they weren’t listening to this verse at all. If  
Christianity is bad news for Jews, it’s bad news for all of us. But listen to  
this verse. At the moment when God shows the divine heart most clearly,**

**we see a deep ocean of mercy. Father forgive us Christians for abusing this verse and God forgive us human beings for abusing everything good.**

**That's the thing. Every good gift on the planet can also be abused. That's one thing the cross tells us. When we put the Son of God up there, *he* responds to us not with vengeance or curses as we would, but with mercy and forgiveness. And so he shows us the way to peace. Forgiveness. There is no force more powerful in the universe.**

**John Lewis was one of Martin Luther King Jr.'s closest friends. He was beaten within an inch of his life on the Pettus bridge in Selma Alabama in 1965. He reflected recently on that experience with these words: "The movement created what I like to call a non-violent revolution. It was love at its best. It's the highest form of love. That you beat me, you arrest me, you take me to jail, you almost kill me, but in spite of that, I'm gonna still love you."<sup>ii</sup>**

**Father, forgive, we don't know what we do. We know it's something. Something we're doing right now our great-grandchildren will be embarrassed by. We just don't know what it is, or we'd stop. In 100 years will they be saying "can you *believe* they drove cars?" the way we say "can you believe what they did to indigenous people?" That's the insidious thing about sin—you don't know when you're doing it, in fact, you think you're trying hard to do your best as a Roman soldier, a religious leader, a 21<sup>st</sup> century Vancouver Islander.**

**And here's what God says over all our misdeeds—not someone else's—*ours*. Forgive. That's all God is, is altogether forgiveness.**

*II The thief said, "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Luke 23:42-43*

As Jesus is being executed two others are executed along with him. Thieves they're called. Bandits is another translation. Brigands perhaps. Crucifixion was a form of death Romans reserved for crimes against the state. So these three may have all been seen as insurrectionists, trying to drive out Roman power and free Israel. When Jesus was a boy there was a rebellion against Rome that was put down with thousands crucified. It keeps executioners busy if they want to keep a people down. My country, the US, is learning this in the Middle East. Or failing to.

Jesus' crucifixion was not a misunderstanding by the Romans. Jesus is a threat to every form of government. Because this is a new form of power. It says that God is on the side of the crushed. *Crushers* would rather not hear that. So they go on spending their power trying to crush. And they accidentally only prove it's all true.

An argument breaks out among the crucified. One says hey, you're a miracle worker, can't you do something? And the other defends Jesus, hey, knock it off. This is the first church committee meeting I think—an argument on crosses. But there's deep mystery here. What is God *for*? Is God there to give you what you want, like a cosmic butler? Hey, Jesus, get yourself off that cross, and get me off too while you're at it! Or is God there to suffer with the lowly, and so deliver them, and the whole world?

I was with a Jewish rabbi friend recently who lamented to me that he finds Jewish adults go on rejecting the version of the faith they

learned when they were 8 years old. Hey, us too! I said. When we're children it's fine to pray for what we want and expect God to give it, like Santa. But when we grow more mature however old or young that is, we realize God is with the poor and crucified. And sometimes God hears our request for what we want and gives us a cross instead. And new life.

Today you will be with me in paradise. The cross is not just another anonymous act of cowardice that could be multiplied infinitely to this day where someone powerful stomps on someone powerless. No no no. This powerless one *is actually all the power there is*. And this stomping, this cross, makes paradise for thieves and brigands and murderers and you and me. The cross changed something. Now we can't just see violence and wreckage as tragedies. They *are* that. But they're also crosses. They're where God is conniving to bring new life.

There's a great movie out called *Lion* about an Indian boy separated from his family in a slum. He ends up in an orphanage, adopted by Australian parents, and when he grows up he finds his Indian family and is reunited with them. Amazing, beautiful. The film ends by saying 80,000 children go missing in India every year. 80,000. 1 was found. 1. What about the other 79,999?

Here's what Jesus says. Today you'll be with me in paradise. *Everything* that's lost will be found. Jesus knows all 79,999 and every other ounce of suffering. He drank it all on his cross. And he is giving back life, healing, restoration. You'll see. Everyone will see.

*III "When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said*

*to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home." John 19:26-27*

As Jesus hangs there dying, he takes care of some family matters. All the gospels say that Jesus' male disciples flee. They know how this movie ends and they don't want to watch it. But Jesus' female disciples stand fast, including his mother. It's odd that Christianity has so often been a boys' club—the boys in the bible don't do well. Except for one. John. The Gospel of John says John stayed put. And he is named Mary's surrogate son, to take care of her. If you visit Ephesus in Turkey, you can see the house where he supposedly did just this until her death.

There are two ways to look at what a family is. One is we're born into it and can't choose it. No way around that. Family, someone said, names the ones who when you have to go there they have to take you in.<sup>iii</sup> That's good. But not always. Sometimes folks don't have family, sometimes birth families can be harmful. And so sometimes we choose something like a family made up of our friends, our church. For those rejected by their family for whatever reason the church is supposed to be a new one. Here we see a glimpse of that. John, Mary, I know you aren't related by blood, but now you are by Jesus.

There is more here. There is always more. Mary is a sign of the strange thing we Christians believe about God. Not just that God is mighty, powerful, good, etc. But also that God is lowly, fleshed, dying on a cross. God has a belly button and hands and feet and a Jewish mom. There is a reason poor peasants the worldwide revere Mary so deeply. When God starts a revolution, God begins by choosing an unmarried

**Jewish teenager from the sticks. Mary's is the face from whom the infant Jesus learned love. And this is a glimpse of what the church is. A new way of being human. Where your race or the religion of your parents or your income or your success or lack thereof don't matter. All that matters is Jesus, who families us into a new way of being. The church will make you crazy if you let it. Because it's full of people and all people are a pain. God only has sinners to work with. But look who else is here. God. His mom. His loyal female disciples and his pitiful male disciples. Loads of crazy and awesome uncles and aunts through the ages. And all of us.**

**There is some anxiety about the gender language in the bible, appropriately. But look what's really happening here. Jesus teaches John to call Mary "mom." He teaches Mary to call John "son." He's teaching us to call his God "Father." He's adopting us into a new family. Family is what births you, harms you, and here, it gives new life.**

***IV "About three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Mt 27:46-47***

**After that little family interlude we're back to the hard nails and wood and God-forsakenness. You may have seen movies or church services that go on and on about the blood. The bible does not. It doesn't try to move us with the degree of suffering. If anything, it tells of another kind of suffering altogether.**

**While on his cross, Jesus quotes Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He feels abandoned by God. If you think nails and spear hurt, try a despair this much deeper. Godlessness.**

**Anybody ever felt that? Godless? Think of every ounce of misery ever experienced by humanity or beast on this planet and you'll catch a glimpse of this verse. Desolation. Abandonment. Sorrow.**

**The image you see is from a medieval hospital that cared for patients with a certain kind of skin disease. And you can guess how Jesus is portrayed. He has that same disease. Sufferers would look over at this giant painting and be reminded, oh, yes, he bore our diseases. To give us new life, fresh pink healthy skin one day. There's a famous sermon about divine wrath called "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (I read it in high school English of all places). This is something different. It's God in the hands of angry sinners. That is all of us. And God plans to use our anger and God's own broken body to give life to us and all the world.**

**That's why for all the reasons not to we still call this Friday "Good." Because God takes on our suffering, whatever it is, and makes it God's own. Suffers it for us. And in return God gives us life, health, paradise. That's a good trade. There is an end to God-forsakenness now. The place of deepest sorrow is a place where God already is, suffering alongside. To bring new life.**

**When one of my sons was getting born I was behind a curtain, where they station the squeamish spouses. I was struck how antiseptic it all was—the gowns, the shoes (which were all I could see), the white white light. And then a cascade of blood fell all over the shoes and gown and light. They were lifting my child out of my wife. There's blood anytime anything new gets born. And then I heard a cry. New life. We normally don't see it. People and animals get born and die out of view for**



**the most part now, that's why so many of us are so squeamish. But blood is just the stuff of life and death. We've got a small ocean of it coursing through our veins and it's beautiful.**

**And God gave us his. His life. In return for our God-forsakenness. Our death. Hear what the God of life says. There is no God-forsakenness that God does not undergo. And there is no tomb safe from the God who makes all things new. No abandonment that God is not changing into joy.**

***V I thirst "After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), 'I am thirsty'." John 19:28***

**Yeah, he would be thirsty. It's not clear how a crucified person died. Maybe just shock and blood loss. They used to say suffocation—you'd get exhausted pushing up on pierced feet to get a breath and quit. Maybe just exposure. Sometimes it took days. We human beings can be immeasurably cruel to one another.**

**And God is immeasurably kinder than our cruelty.**

**So Jesus expresses his thirst. In one act of pity, one of the soldiers lifts up a sponge for Jesus to drink. Or was it more cruelty? Giving water could prolong life and so suffering. We don't know. It's all such a mess.**

**I learned something from the great Jewish scholar Daniel Boyarin. He was lecturing away in Vancouver last year about how Jewish Jesus is, and he stopped for a sip of water. It's something we speakers do. But because he was mic'd we heard him pray a prayer in Hebrew. It was the best point of learning in the very learned lecture. There is nothing good in the world that shouldn't occasion a prayer of thanks from us. Every sip**

of drink, bite of food, every trip to the bathroom, every drop of rain or ray of sun, every human face, every breath we take, thank you God. It didn't have to be. But it is. What an unimaginable miracle.

And now the author of all life is undergoing death. One way that ancient Christians wondered about the cross was to think about our first parents, Adam and Eve. The story says they fell by a tree. So God worked out our salvation with a tree. They fell with a piece of fruit, something you taste and drink. So God brought new life with other food, bread and wine, that we also taste and drink. Eve and Adam collapsed in a torrent of blame. It's her fault! No it's his! It's the snake's! God it's your fault! We humans have been blaming and scapegoating one another ever since. So God responded not with blame but with mercy. God said yes, it's my fault, and dies.

I thirst. Simple, human, we can't live without water. But there's more here. There's always more. Jesus is surrounded by thieves, murderers, a few loyal women, his mom, her adopted son. Curious onlookers. Folks who don't care who just happen by. Crucifixions happened on major thoroughfares to broadcast Rome's power. The image here is of a limitless sea of people. Our ancient forbears say what Jesus is really thirsting for is all of them. All of us. He wants to drink them in. Make them part of his body. I mean us.

When we speak of the church as the body of Christ I hope we notice how odd that is. We're the toenails and eyelashes and spleen of God. What Christ is showing is that he's slurping us up into a new humanity. He longs to include everyone. Because he loves. No, he is love. He thirsts.

And we are his drink. St. Augustine says the Lord's Supper works backwards from normal food. Normally we eat and drink and digest and the food becomes part of our body. With the Lord's Supper we eat and drink, and *it digests us*, makes us into the body of Christ. And that's about the weirdest thing we got.

VI "He said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit." John 19:30

And after the sponge was raised to his mouth he was done. "It is finished," he says. It's all accomplished. Everything he came to do is done. He has repaired the relationship between God and humanity ruined in the fall now blossoming into new life.

This painting is by the great Spanish artist Diego Velazquez. I love the way it blocks out all else and gives us just Jesus. There's a kind of light on him. He's lit almost from within. His head gives off another kind of light altogether. Being a Christian is learning to see. To look where most won't. And to see life even there. Look, in a crucified man. Look, in humanity at its most damaged. Look, at humanity at its most *damaging*. And see the new life God is bringing. It's hard to do. That's why we practice. Practice is called church.

How's it work? How does the death of this one man make new life for all? I'll give you two answers now and one in the last word in a moment. One says that humanity had been ruined beyond all repair. We can see this in Syria, in the US, in ourselves. There needs to be an accounting for all this ruin. A reckoning. God can't just wave a magic wand and say "it's all good." There had to be restoration. But

unfortunately we human beings can't do it. We're the *ruiners*. The only one who can is God. But the only one who needs repair is humanity. So there needed to be a God-man, Jesus, who could both repair and be part of the ruined. His work on the cross is to mend what's torn. And in ways we can't imagine he's done that.

Now if you're like my students you don't care for that explanation. Sounds too mathematical, too logical, too medieval somehow. But you might like this one better. Another ancient teacher said no no no, that's not it at all. Here's what happens with the cross. The cross shows us how much God loves us. Love in this world suffers. God shows that. So does every other lover. Try loving somebody, just one person, and there will be sorrow. Try loving everybody and your sorrow is multiplied infinitely. That's what God does. God's suffering brings healing. We don't know how. We just hold on to that hope. It's called faith.

I'm not saying it makes sense. It doesn't. It's God we're trying to talk about. Who can make sense of God? I am trying to say here's the strange not-sense this makes. God loves. That love suffers. And it's redeeming the world. Right now. One day it will redeem the world in full. You'll see. Everyone will see. And rejoice.

*VII "Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last. Lk 23:46*

Here, at the end, Jesus again quotes the psalm. It's the most Jewish thing he could do. He learned the songs and stories of Israel while bouncing on his mother's knee. When he doesn't know what to say he

reverts to baby talk, as we all will one day. Thankfully his baby talk included this verse.

A family patriarch lay dying recently. The whole family was gathered except one grandchild en route. As the old man died he sang a hymn. It was Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." There were words when he had no words. The man's son called the grandchild en route. And said son, I need you to get to church. I need you to learn the songs. So that when that's me or you in that bed we have a song on our lips.<sup>iv</sup>

Into your hands. Julian of Norwich, author of the first book in English by a woman, said in the 1300s that all the malice of our enemy is contained in the hands of a friend. God. There is nothing that can happen that God cannot just repair, but redeem, and work good through. God says to humanity "what's the worst you can do?" And we torture God's son to death. And God takes that death and makes new life for the world out of it. And God says again, "that all you got?"

The image you see is of God taunting death. It's a resurrection icon of the sort Eastern Orthodox Christians paint, pray in front of, lift incense before, kiss, it's very sensual worship. And it's an image of Christ harrowing hell. Harrow is an old farming term—it means Christ went and dug up hell. It's not there anymore. In the image he's broken down the gate of hell and he's lifting out Adam and Eve. That is, all humanity. Now the gate is smashed. The only hells there are are locked from the inside, not the outside. And every gate of every hell quakes a little. Because this liberator is loose and unlocking prisoners.

**That's why Easter is such great good news. It's not just that Christ's tomb is empty. It's that every tomb will one day give up its prize. God taunts death. And that's amazing. Our whole culture is terrified of death. We spend trillions, not billions, but trillions on medicine to ward death off, creams and exercise to delay its ravages, products to trick us into thinking it's not coming. But it is. And that should surprise no one. So far the death rate for the condition called "being human" is 100%. Here's what *should* surprise everyone. Death is not the end. Christ shows us that with his cross and resurrection. And now no tomb is safe from the God who loves raising the dead.**

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<sup>i</sup> It's Paul Claudel's distinction

<sup>ii</sup> It's from the recent On Being interview with Lewis, with gratitude to Kristen Richardson-Frick for pointing me to it.

<sup>iii</sup> A parishioner at Trinity when I preached this told me it's Robert Frost's comment, about home rather than family. I got it from Jonathan Sacks, discussing Zionism.

<sup>iv</sup> James Howell's story