

God Cried

A fellow tells a story about how he tried to stop his son Matthew from stealing comic books when Matthew was a youngster.

He tried time outs and reasoning with the boy, shouting and scolding, yet none of these things worked.

Finally, he resorted to something he rarely used: a spanking.

He did it deliberately, almost ritualistically, and he was so upset when he finished that he left the room and wept.

After pulling himself back together, he went to Matthew and hugged him.

Years later, Matthew and his mother were talking story, and Matthew happened to bring up the time when he kept stealing comic books.

"And you know why I finally stopped?" he asked.

"Sure," his mom replied, "Because Dad finally spanked you."

"No," said Matthew, "No, I stopped because Dad cried." Walter Wangerin, Jr., *The Manger Is Empty*, pp. 116-132.

Last month we suffered through the umpteenth mass slaughter in one of our public schools.

This time it was Florida children who were sacrificed at the altar of freely available assault rifles.

Unlike every other modern society on the planet, we have elevated gun rights from a privilege to a commandment - placing them even above the right to life.

And the surviving students cried.

And then they travelled to the Florida legislature, a laboratory of radical pro gun laws for the last 20 years, and those students did what no one has done - they got that legislature to impose modest yet helpful restrictions on these weapons.

The surviving students cried.

And within a month, students from Delaware to Hawaii left their classrooms last Wednesday to stand up for life - to challenge the gun lobby - to demand change in how we as a society deal with guns.

The surviving students cried.

And this week, students from Delaware to Hawaii, including some of our own, will travel to Washington DC to bring that same message of change.

When my wife died of cancer at 39, life as I knew it ended.

As all of you who've lost a spouse or a child to death know, the aftermath is unspeakable, you feel as if you're walking around enveloped in jello.

And I cried.

Yet, these many years later, standing before you as your priest, I can tell you that anything of value I have to offer you, any insight or small amount of depth I may have received, it all comes from losing Isa; it all comes from her death.

"Unless a grain falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

Tears and suffering and death.

Aren't these the things we fear the most, the things we work so hard to avoid?

And yet with God, tears and suffering and death are the means by which we find life and love and community.

In our first reading this morning, God promises to write his law no longer on tablets of stone, but on the heart of each and every person.

And the question that I'll bet Jeremiah is dying to ask is:

How you gonna do it Lord???

When shouting and demanding and rules and regulations don't bring the desired result, what does?

And today, Jesus gives us the answer.

It is tears and suffering and death that get us to where we need to be.

This is how the ruler of this world is overthrown, Jesus assures us.

Whether we call that ruler Satan or the System, this broken world that we live in is drowning in the myth of redemptive violence.

Meaning that violence, if it is used by the right people for the right reasons, can bring about the peace we all hope for.

This is a lie, a lie that Jesus comes to abolish once and for all.

The System is our creation, and yet it seems to have almost complete control over us.

It is the System that drives us to worship force and power, to distrust one another, to build border walls, to encourage division among people.

The System is a symptom of our brokenness.

It is the System, speaking through Pontius Pilate, who sneers at Jesus, as Jesus stands, seemingly defenseless, before the Roman governor.

"My kingdom is not of this world," he says.

And neither is ours my friends.

We belong to the kingdom of God.

And that is a kingdom based not a competition but compassion.

Not on self-preservation, but extending mercy to others.

Not on controlling people, places and things, but surrendering and emptying ourselves with complete trust that God will fill the emptiness with a joy we cannot even imagine.

In short, die before you die so when you die you won't die!

What might that look like?

"A woman describes her 20-year battle with cancer, a battle she thought she won ten years ago, but which recently returned.

There is a difference, however, between the battle she waged then and the battle she's waging now.

This time she senses a Presence with her, one that she identifies with the suffering Christ, one who assures her that everything is going to be okay.

And while she doesn't know exactly what "okay" means: whether she's going to live, or whether she's going to die; despite that uncertainty, she

trusts the "voice" she hears when it assures her that everything is going to be all right, no matter what may happen.

Or maybe it looks something like a friend who hit bottom, who experienced first hand what it means to let go, to die to oneself.

This fellow literally spun out of control as he crossed the centerline in his sports car heading the wrong way on a highway at over 100 miles per hour, totally drunk.

He is a big shot lawyer who found himself stuck in the depths of alcoholism.

He comes home one day to find his family, his minister, and three of his closest friends all sitting in his living room.

And it's not his birthday.

Yet -- it is.

He's on his way back now, thanks to a twelve step program.

He is a private man, so he won't share all the details, but he did say this:

"I was always a regular at church, but in the back of my mind, I always thought the Church was for losers, for the weak.

But you would be amazed at what I've learned about God."

"Like what?" he's asked.

"That so much of what I heard year in and year out at church is suddenly real to me," replied the man.

"Like what?"

"Like 'Take up your cross' and 'You can only find your life by losing it.'

Through hitting bottom, I've met God."

"And who is the God you have met?"

"God is a tough, relentless, devastating, friend." W. Willimon.

No it is not violence that will rule the day, it is tears.

Tears that become floodwaters that can and do change the face of the earth – and soften every human heart.

Whether that brokenness is a young boy stealing comic books, or mass killings in our schools, or the loss of our loved ones far too early, tears have the power to change us, cleanse us, heal us.

Next Sunday we will reenact the journey from our love affair with redemptive violence to the truth of self-emptying love.

Our parade around the block with palm branches is all about our longing for a Messiah who will take control by violence, throwing the bums out and putting our bums in control instead.

But our parade is quickly followed by God's insistence that there is another way.

And as we move into Passion Sunday, sitting in stunned silence as the Creator of all that is, is nailed to a tree, will we hear his cry?

"My God, my God why have you forsaken me?!"

And will the tears of God be enough to soften our hearts, to change our minds, to bring us home?

+amen

