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CRUELTY: JESUS' EXECUTION AND TWO SIGNPOSTS

We do not like to talk about cruelty, yet outrage over cruelty, and its effect on our lives and those we know, is evident in our intimate conversations, in our theological scholarship, within our pastors' sermons and the speeches of our public leaders. We usually define “cruelty” analogously, or we point to an event and name it cruel. And yet, cruelty is very real; it is not elusive in how it encounters and even disfigures our lives and our world.¹

What specific examples of cruelty come to mind in your context? In our world today?

No single definition fully captures how cruelty effects our lives: irresolvable conflicts that turn vicious and violate human well-being, destroying loved ones, as well as governmental neglect or outright persecution. Cruelty causes excessive pain in us, our relationships, and our institutions. “Cruel ills” contradict the fundamental values that make our lives livable.²

Jesus was no stranger to cruelty particularly in his execution. Only in the Lukan account (Lk 23:34a) of the execution does Jesus utter a telling and radical petition – “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Behind this petition are two fundamental questions: who are “they” and what is it that they “do?” Whom is Jesus talking about? These two questions and the petition itself are what Luke’s Gospel has left for us, like a narrative signpost at the closing moments of the execution of Jesus. It wants to convey to us the message, “we were here ... too.” Our attention is drawn to the public execution of Jesus and through the execution, our attention is drawn further toward a petition for forgiveness of they who do. What we discover is that this petition is uttered by Jesus in the painful self-recognition of his own dying body not only exposed to human scorn, but the loss of hope through extreme loneliness.

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Golgotha is a site of public execution as well as a site for city refuse. Human refuse is a poignant symbol in this execution, and sadly, one that has been punctuated in recent years by unforeseen mass graves and hundreds of thousands of displaced persons in places such as Sudan, Liberia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kosovo and Iraq. We are asked to see these events and hear these words at the execution of Jesus anew for ourselves.

But why has the Lukan community directed us—in the final moments of an execution—to forgiveness that remained clear for Jesus even through his own death? The petition for forgiveness at the execution does not progress in a linear fashion from human sin and death to divine salvation. Rather, in the final moments of his execution, Jesus' petition for forgiveness is thrust upward and outward from within the center of this conflict. The petition is for the Father to forgive them in three ways: forgive their willingness to perpetrate these actions (they *do*), the actions they are perpetrating (*what* they do), and the ignorance they display (they *know* not what they do) with respect to these actions.

We know all too well the willful or oblivious acts of our own sins and the genesis of sin when Adam and Eve bit into the apple and, shortly thereafter, their son Cain murdered his brother Abel in an open field. On Eden's eastern slope, at the cross, or in our own lives, sin escapes neither God's attention nor the possibility for forgiveness that brings reconciliation. If the Father forgives, then reconciliation is possible.

And yet, for the Lukan community as for us today, this petition at the end of Jesus' own execution is perhaps unsettling due to the radical implication it has for our lives. Like Jesus, are we to forgive and reconcile with others, not only for their lesser trespasses, but also for the larger cruelties that have fractured our lives? Should every Christian Liberian be asked to forgive those within the ousted presidency of Charles Taylor who were involved in the 1990 slaughter of eight hundred civilians at St Peter's Lutheran Church in Monrovia? What form would this forgiveness take? Would a kind of forgiveness and reconciliation be appropriate that would not harm the living memories of those who were slaughtered?

What challenges do forgiveness and reconciliation pose for you?

Or, in this case, are forgiveness and reconciliation part of the task of assisting the dispossessed to reclaim food, clean water, shelter, livelihood and respect? This kind of labor is central to the work of the Lutheran World Federation/World Service program in Liberia. Charles Pitchford's presentation to LWF staff in November, 2003, revealed how building local concrete bridges not only makes physical access possible, but also helps in the healing of the country. Forgiveness and reconciliation are about finding healing, difficult as that is. Yet this is central if past brutalities will not consume us or our children in the present.

The Lukan community has left us a second signpost in Lk 6:31 – “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Forgiveness and reconciliation do not just

depend on what we “do unto others” but how we “do unto ourselves” as if we were the other. Who would we be as the other and what would we do? Understanding the other in this intimate way, can lead to more fully identifying human sin and potentially to reconciliation. Thereafter, forgiveness and reconciliation enable us, above all, not to poison the next generation with the sins of the past. Christian freedom means that we can identify and follow a path of forgiveness and reconciliation that is critical to continued existence. For those who know self-trespass, or who know the trespass of domestic abuse, or who know the real and ever-present trespass of dispossession, reconciliation is hard work that begins at the ground floor of reconstructing life again.

There are no simple and uniform roadmaps toward forgiveness and reconciliation after specific cruelties have harmed or destroyed well-being. Long before us, the Lukan community left us with two signposts – forgiveness and reaching out to the other. Like them, we never go alone—God goes with us through trespass, forgiveness and reconciliation. That God's presence graces even the darkest corners of our lives means that we are free to live faithfully and fully in our communities and in this world. As a global priesthood of believers, we are given the freedom to see and hear cruelties. Furthermore, we witness in faith to the word of forgiveness and reconciliation in our lives.

The radical nature of Jesus' petition from the cross and the complex realities of our individual, regional, national and global communities mean that the challenges of forgiveness and reconciliation, in their manifold forms, are always before us. How we face these challenges in the present will shape how in future we understand ourselves as communities of faith.

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¹ Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, 9; see also, Michel de Montaigne, “Of the Art of Conversing,” *The Essays of Montaigne*, 2 v. trans. E.J. Trechman, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 383.

² Augustine, *City of God*, 22:22; Thomas Aquinas, “De Crudelitate,” *Summa Theologica*, 2.2.15; and Spinoza, “Ethics,” *Collected Works of Spinoza* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988), 3.38; 540.