

When they came to the place they call ‘The Skull,’ they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus says, “Forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing. In the name God. Amen.

I.

Good Friday comes every year with its unique burden of grief. We know the story, we have heard it, felt it, wept over it. But every year it comes to us with renewed regret and sorrow, even though, for the Christian, the outcome of the story does not remain in tragedy but emerges in triumph. Yet, the pain of it never diminishes. When we hear the words of the passion, so simple and so utterly heartbreaking, we allow our hearts to be wounded anew.¹

We need only to remember, if just for a moment, that the disciples, witnessing the crucifixion of their teacher and friend almost 2000 years ago, do not have any books of Scripture to read. It is also unlikely, even assuming that the disciples could read, that they would have been devotedly quoting Isaiah as their would-be Messiah is hanging from the cross. We have so often forgotten, it seems, that a critical part of our Good Friday experience is to live, as best we can, as witnesses of the horror and senselessness of the crucifixion.

We are encouraged to believe that Jesus dies, and not just dies, but is brutally killed for the sake of a greater cause, a greater good. We call this ancient and time-tested understanding the doctrine of the “atonement;” in all of its many attempts, in the end, to make sense out of what is essentially, a completely senseless situation. In this way, the ancient teaching seems to be strikingly human. How often we find ourselves attempting to see some semblance of order, to find a place of stability on which to stand in the face of disaster, death, and decay.

Who among us has never felt an inkling of this kind of helplessness, that sinking sense of loneliness? *Who has not known the God of Absence? Who has not felt abandoned by God?*²

II.

None of the players in the passion narrative even remotely have things “figured out.” The disciples resort to violence and scatter in panic long before the most important action takes place. Even Pilate, the most powerful figure in the story, finds himself watching over events whirling violently out of control. After his famously cynical remark, “What is truth?” we find him vehemently chastising Jesus for not recognizing the governor’s power of life and death over him.

It is only a few verses later, however, that Pilate realizes he can no longer stop the process that has begun. The people are furious. They are not interested in mercy. They want blood, and they want it right away. They want it right now. Pilate’s power suddenly evaporates; he can only write the inscription for the cross, “wash his hands” and walk away from the carnage of the day.

Jesus, the man who would be God, is swept up into the hands of the soldiers and of the priests; he is beaten, mocked, and scourged in a way that ought to chill our bones to a degree beyond any awe we might feel at the fulfillment of a scriptural prophecy.

For those of you who saw Mel Gibson’s movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, and were sickened by the brutality of Jesus’ torture and crucifixion, I can tell you when you are there – and I have been to Israel several times – and when you see

¹ Katerina Whitley. Good Friday Sermon. April 2, 2010.

² Joan Chittister. *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope.* The Struggle of Darkness.” Eerdmans:Canada. 2003. 39.

the places for yourself and experience a little of the unrest of the Middle East, you realize perhaps for the first time, the extent of the horrible suffering our Lord goes through.

And while the authors of each Gospel write with such an emphasis on symbolism, scriptural fulfillment, and deep meaning, there is no loss of the terror and emptiness of the crucifixion experience – an experience which leaves our Savior, a victim of institutionalized violence with the paradoxical final words: “Father, forgive them.”

III.

Thomas Ann Hines, a divorced mother of an only child, learned about what it means to forgive the hard way.³ The call that awakened her in the middle of that February night in 1985 was from the Texas Medical Examiner’s Office in Austin. The caller asked if she knew a Paul Hines. Her son, Paul, a twenty-one year old senior at Austin Community College, lay murdered by a seventeen year-old drifter, Robert White, who first solicited a ride from him and then, when he got in the car, turned a gun on the young driver,

Thomas Ann descended into a pit of anger and vengeance. The murder was a random, groundless, indefensible act. And her son was not the only person who died that night—Thomas Ann was alone, distraught, full of the kind of pain and hate that paralyzes the heart and stops life in its tracks, even for the living. Her son, the hope of her life was gone. She herself was completely alone now, without a future, without hope, without any reason, it seemed, to live.

Thirteen years later, on the morning of June 9, 1998 in the Chapel of the Alfred D. Hughes Correctional Facility in Gatesville, Texas, Thomas Ann Hines visited her son’s killer in prison, intent only on getting information about the night of the killing. But when, in the course of the eight hour conversation the young man hung his head as tears welled up in his eyes, put his face down on the small table at which they sat and began to sob, she reached out and touched the man. And she got to know him.

The story shocked the country. “How could she do such a thing?” people asked. Or, more to the point, perhaps, they asked themselves the question, “Could I ever do such a thing? Could I possibly forgive someone who had done something so senseless, so heinous, so destructive to me?”

Thomas Ann’s answer to the question was a simple one: “If my son was sitting in this room,” she said, “I would want someone to reach out a hand and lift him up.”

IV.

The story is not only a moving one, it is an enlightening one for all of us. It teaches us something very important about mercy and forgiveness. Mercy is what God does for us. Mercy discounts the economic sense of love and faith and care for a person and lives out of a divine sense of love instead. Mercy gives a human being who does not “deserve” love, love. And why? Because, the Scriptures answer, God knows of what we are made.

The fact is that we are all made of the same thing: clay, the dust of the earth, the frail, fragile, shapeless thing from which we come and to which we will all return someday. We are all capable of the same things. Our only hope is that when we are sitting somewhere bereft, exposed, outcast, humiliated and rejected by the rest of society, someone, somewhere will “reach out a hand and lift us up.”

Too often, senseless acts intersect and disrupt our orderly lives, our plans for something better for ourselves and for those whom we love. An unexpected death. Losing a job, exchanging angry words with a friend or a stranger, or a co-

³From *The Way of Mercy*, ed. Christine Bochen, Orbis 2016. (Originally published in *God's Tender Mercy*, Joan Chittister, Twenty-Third Publications).
<http://www.joanchittister.org/articles/divine-mercy-audacity-mercy>

worker, or the breakup of a friendship or household. These are all such inexplicably heartbreaking events, especially when seen against a backdrop of systemic violence like the suicide bombings and military brutality in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the nuclear powder keg in Iran and North Korea; and closer to home, the threat of terrorism, the shootings in our schools and the violence on our city streets that continues to dominate our world. *In the depths of our pain, My God, my God why have you forsaken me becomes a personal cry.*⁴

Jesus can cry out to God from his sense of abandonment, but still he cries, *My God.*⁵

It is in the face of our darkest moments, in the chaos of our lives, even in the reality of our own death, that we are granted permission to give ourselves completely over, as Christ did, to the seemingly impossible potential that somehow, in the end, God might draw grace out of senselessness. This is the Good News of Good Friday. Amen.

4 Chittister, Joan. *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope.* "The Struggle of Darkness." Eerdmans:Canada. 2003. 39.

5 Bartlett, David. *What's Good About This News?* Westminster: KY. 2003. 41.