



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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The Encompassing Compassion of Jesus

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 18, 2021

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on 2 Samuel 7:1-14a; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy upon us.



I pray with this cross every night. It's the San Damiano cross, the one St. Francis of Assisi gazed upon, the one that compelled him to drop everything—including the clothes on his back—in order to follow Jesus.

I can see why this crucifix struck such a deep chord in young Francis. It is impossible not to be arrested by Jesus's soft downcast eyes, the holes in his hands and feet, the blood dripping from his wounds. It has the flatness of an icon, but it is also quite tender, pained and real.

Much of Christian life and piety directs our gaze to this, the body of Jesus. His hands, feet, eyes, heart. In today's gospel, we are reminded that it goes both ways. Jesus also loves and tends our bodies.

Throughout this 6th chapter of Mark, our Lord cares for people in all their fleshiness and need. He pushes the apostles to rest and eat. He steers them to a quiet place, where they can breathe. He heals the

waves of sick people laid out on mats. He welcomes strangers to touch the hem of his garment and be healed. All these bodies, they matter to God.

All these bodies, and he feels their pain. In v. 34, he sees "a great crowd" and it says "he had compassion for them." Compassion, in Hebrew, is *rakhamim*. It's the same as the word for "womb." So Jews like Jesus would have understood compassion as more than sympathy. It is womb-love, the kind that tugs and twists your guts. You experience pain, in response to the pain of another.

That's the compassion that overtakes Jesus when he sees these crowds, hungry, exhausted, pained, burned out, lonely, oppressed, crying for relief and bread.

Christianity is not just a religion of spirit and prayer. It's not just a religion where we worship and gaze upon the body of Jesus. It's a faith that trusts that our bodies, our exhaustion, our hunger, our pain: it matters to God. It twists and breaks God's own heart.

I've needed this reminder. As the Delta variant rips through unvaccinated communities, I imagine the waves of sick and dying people. I imagine the exhaustion, hunger, physical and mental pain that nurses,

doctors and support staff continue to endure. They just can't stop, because this pandemic just won't stop. Jesus feels for them. Their bodies, their pain, their cries: they matter to God. If we are his body, they matter to us.

At home in Kentucky a few weeks ago, I felt womb love and pain as I watched yet another incident of police brutality captured on cell phone. Every TV station in the state showed the video and carried the story: the cops were chasing a car driven by a "known drug dealer." Two black girls were in the back. One was my 19-year-old cousin Maysia Harris.

She was terrified, wanted out of the car. When the cops finally stopped the vehicle, she and her friend stuck their arms out the window, hands up. "We're not armed. Help us!" Instead, the cops dragged the girls out of the car, flung them to the concrete. In the video, they don't look like humans so much as rag dolls, whipped to the ground, back and forth. Maysia sustained a concussion and untold psychic and spiritual wounds.

I've seen these videos. We all have. But there's something different when you see your own blood. When you see someone whose birth you recall, whose baby pictures are in your mama's house. It's different when you sit beside her eating Aunt Carol's chicken pie.

The hurt is different when you know her story. Maysia graduated from high school last year. And her first job? She's the night caretaker at a psychiatric hospital. When mentally ill patients wake in the middle of the night, she's the one in the room who calms them. Who will do it for her?

It's been nearly a month since I first saw the video and I can barely look or think about it without a wave of pain. I want to do something, anything to protect her and others from police brutality and exploitation. I want to defend our right to vote, our right to breathe. I want truth in our classrooms and truth in the halls of power. I want America to stop hunting us and hating us. And I hurt, because every day the powers of oppression and their lies seem to get stronger and smarter.

Do you know this pain? I think more of us feel it—and feel overwhelmed by it—than we admit. Well, maybe that's why I need to speak it today. You see, about a month ago, around when I saw the video, I developed heartburn that simply will not go away. I've crunched on Tums and now Prilosec. I've gotten acupuncture. I've seen a gastro specialist. We're treating symptoms, and it's working, but I know there's something else, a deeper pain that's not only mine. I told the doctor this week that racism is breaking my heart, making me sick.

I need to do something else with this pain, so I can do more than turn away in disgust or turn inward in despair. That's why the Jesus in today's gospel is so real and necessary.

His gut twists with compassion at the pain we bear and especially the pain we cause one another. His heart breaks at the deaths of the Breonna Taylors and George Floyds and the suffering of the Maysia Harris and the systemic racism and hierarchies of human value that fuel all this evil. Jesus sees it all, and he is overcome by compassion, by womb-love, and he comes near to share and ease the pain that doubles us over.

Of course I want him to fix it, so there are no more Maysias and George Floyds. So that voting rights won't be stripped before our eyes. So the truth will win over lies. But it doesn't seem to work out that way.

What I have seen, what I know, is that Jesus' loving, liberating power effects deep healing almost apart from the actual situation. Because I know he is understanding and carrying the pain of the world, carrying

us as a shepherd bears lost sheep, because I know the depth of his *rakhamim*-compassion-womb-love, the awful ache in my own gut can untwist just a bit.

His encompassing compassion allows me to close my eyes in prayer and give him all the waves of confusion, anger, pain and weariness. I can close my eyes and lift these hurting bodies to him. I can reach out and receive the bread of communion and know this is how we reach out to touch the hem of his garment and receive his power.

And when I open my eyes, when I swallow that bread, I am more centered and ready to be an instrument of God's healing, grace, and peace. Ready to build the world God intended, the one we heard about in Ephesians 2: where there are no more strangers and aliens, no more privileged and oppressed, but only beloved children and members of the household of God.

Because of his outstretched arms embracing of the pain of the world, including mine, I can hold and help to slowly change what is before me without breaking down or tipping into despair. You can, too.

Today, in this world wracked with such pain, *rakhamim*—the womb-twisting, compassionate love of God—really is good news. It may be the best news there is.

Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy upon us.

Amen.

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