

Good Friday April 10, 2020
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Broken
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When he hung up the phone that night, he had “a wet face and a broken heart.” That was the night Bryan Stevenson, lawyer and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative realized his own brokenness. The phone call that brought this sorrow about for him was with a man he had been trying to help by stopping his execution. This man had been sentenced to death for a crime Bryan agrees he should be punished for, but not by taking his life. The man Bryan had been talking too had long suffered from mental illness, poverty, and racism and had called minutes before his execution to thank Bryan for trying to help; to tell him it meant a lot, even though he was still going to die.

As Bryan Stevenson described the night in his memoir *Just Mercy, A Story of Justice and Redemption*, the man’s gratitude before his death triggered in Bryan a sense of futility in his life’s work because he was working in a justice system broken by racism, poverty, and mental illness, and it overwhelmed him. He cried. He cried for the people he represented who were broken by disease, drug addiction, alcoholism, poverty, inequality, abuse, pride and anger. He began to doubt the value of his work, despaired, and felt tempted to walk away from it because he knew he can never fix a system and people who are so severely broken.

In the midst of his despair at the brokenness of the institutions in the world and in the people he had been working for and with, he realized something even deeper: that he himself is broken. He has done things that hurt others, usually out of his own anger or fear or frustration. It’s no wonder he was sobbing. Such realizations aren’t the kind of feel good inspiration we humans prefer to read about. But instead of giving in to the temptation to quit, Bryan had what I would call a Good Friday revelation as he sat in despair over the brokenness of humanity. The revelation that the brokenness of humanity connects us, it is part of who and what we are. Many of us are broken because of what we have done, others are broken because of what happens to them. We can’t escape it. But we can recognize it, and instead of being afraid of our brokenness, or ashamed of it, we might learn from it, and in the knowledge of what we learn, change to be more like Christ.

Bryan explained his thoughts that one of the main reasons why humans believe in violence is because it gives us the illusion that some of us aren’t broken and are therefore strong enough to punish the weaker, broken people. If we can get them out of sight, we don’t have to face our own brokenness and can live in the illusion of wholeness. But the truth is, Bryan believes, we can’t be whole until we do the work of

loving the broken by learning to respect the dignity of every human being. Bryan does that so powerfully is his belief that each of us is more than the worst thing we've done.

That belief is what fuels his work, work that he has continued to do for over forty-five years. It is what I would call a Good Friday lesson.

Good Friday is one of those days when the churches are not full, even without stay at home mandates. It is a day that is hard for many people to face, because it requires us to look at the brokenness of humanity through the lens of the crucified Christ. That is so painful, we humans sometimes look for distractions from that pain. One distraction is to put blame on someone or a group of people for Jesus' death. But that is a waste of time. It is not the Jews who are to blame. It isn't even Rome that is to blame. The practice of blame is just another sign of our human brokenness and has contributed to prejudice and violence. Finding someone to blame misses the entire point of Good Friday.

Jesus was crucified because of the same brokenness in systems, institutions, governments, and individuals that Bryan Stevenson lamented thousands of years later. If you read through the Passion narrative for today, it's not hard to pick out the brokenness of humanity. It all starts when Judas betrayed Jesus and his disciples. Caiaphas exemplifies brokenness when he said it was better for one person to die so many won't. Peter lied and denied Jesus three times. Soldiers were violent toward Jesus even before he was flogged. The back and forth between Pilate, Caiaphas, and Herod is the brokenness of politics and power struggles. Crucifixion was a type of death meant to intimidate people and rob them of hope of rising up and chasing Rome from their land.

No wonder so few people want to come to church on Good Friday. Who wants to face all that brokenness? God does. God became human and dwelt among us and that means God dwelt with us in our brokenness. On the cross, Jesus shows us God really is life-giving love, even when he has disappointed us.

Disappointment is part of Good Friday too. On Good Friday we face not only a crucified Christ, we face a Jesus who disappointed pretty much everyone. The people in Jesus day were just as aware of the brokenness of human systems as we are today, maybe even more so. That is why they longed for a Messiah who would come and fix all that brokenness by simply being stronger than Rome, more violent than Rome, more organized than Rome. A Messiah who would put *them* in power by fulfilling the myth of the strong man, the man who is so smart, so violent, so powerful, so cruel, so clever, so strong, he will destroy anyone who gets in his way. A man so strong he never loses. It's a myth many still cling to in hopes of salvation from a system that is broken by fear, greed, anger, inequality, poverty, injustice, violence, insecurity, ignorance, and carelessness.

That's why the crowds turned on Jesus, turned from welcoming him on Palm Sunday to demanding his crucifixion on Good Friday. By Friday they had figured out Jesus was just another weak, broken man who disappointed them because he wouldn't fix the broken world. God is like that. God doesn't offer to fix what we've broken. God offers something a lot better. Redemption.

On the cross, Jesus shows us God isn't a handyman cleaning up our messes. On the cross, Jesus shows us God is a God of love and mercy. As he was being crucified Jesus prayed to God to "forgive them, they don't know what they are doing." We can assume Jesus meant to forgive those who were part of the broken system, the fearful, violent, ignorant, broken people who were all part of the story. When Bryan Stevenson sat one night with tears streaming down his face feeling the brokenness of humanity, he felt connected with all people and he realized our brokenness doesn't have to lead us to hurting others as we've been hurt. Our brokenness can show us the need for mercy and compassion. When we show mercy, unmerited mercy, there is hope of change, of breaking the broken system, and that is where healing and wholeness can be begin.

On the cross, Jesus showed mercy by asking God to forgive those who killed him. In the midst of human brokenness, Jesus showed us something stronger than violence, anger, greed, fear, injustice, racism, sexism, even tyranny: God's love embodied in mercy. That's why we call today Good Friday.

The covid-19 pandemic has exposed much of the world's brokenness. It shows us the brokenness of our economy and health care system; it exposes the injustice, inequality, racism, poverty, and sexism that we are already aware of, but might make us feel the brokenness a little more than we had before the pandemic. It also reminds us that we are connected to each other; what one person does can and will have an impact on more than one other person. That interdependence can be humbling, comforting, and concerning all at the same time.

On a day when the Church asks us to look once again at our brokenness through the cross of Christ, perhaps we can find the courage to look and sit with our collective and individual brokenness long enough to endure the pain that leads to discovery of God with us in our brokenness not as a strong man who will magically take it from us, but redeems us with the salvation of mercy. In that mercy I pray you will find strength of Christ to use this time we have been given to find new ways to advocate for each other, to connect with each other, to show mercy and let that mercy give strength to a broken world. Because we are more than our brokenness.

Let us pray:

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

– *Good Friday Service, Book of Common Prayer, page 280*