

Losers, Amish and the Reign of Christ
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St. Luke 23:44

Eighteen years ago when I felt I had been thrown under the bus by people who were supposed to have my back. It wasn't right and, on principle, I was not about to drop my fists. I was on the phone one day with my friend Del, going off on a full-on Wayne-style rant detailing all of this. Finally my friend said to me: "Wayne, you are actually right about all of it." I thought to myself "Thank you. Exactly. That's why I am fighting."

Except without skipping a beat he added "You are right about all of it AND ... it doesn't matter" Wait. What? Are you kidding me? If you are right about something, then what else CAN matter?

That was before I realized all the ways I had participated in creating the situation I found myself in.

I tell this story today, because knowing that our reading for today, was going to be the crucifixion text, I've been obsessed all week with the fact that three times in this text during his crucifixion, people say to Jesus, "save yourself."

Seriously Jesus, you healed the sick and raised the dead and performed wonders and miracles, so we know you have it in you ... for God's sake man, save yourself. If you are the Son of God, if you are the Messiah, then why on earth are you allowing yourself to be humiliated like this? Make it stop. You're embarrassing us. And why are you being such a loser, anyway?

See, we humans tend to be obsessed with winners and losers, insiders and outsiders, good people and bad people. And we can only win if someone else loses. This is the game. Some win, some lose. It's everywhere.

And that win-lose, good-bad, insider-outsider thing we are all engaged in? .. I know this is a little pop-psychology-y, but I think that it is somehow linked to our own fear of death and loss and the fear that we are not loved. So we fight, and compete and argue based on principle. Or we send passive aggressive emails when we feel wronged. Or we talk trash about someone who has hurt us. All of which I have either done or considered doing in just in the past week alone, but none of which will ever fend off loss or

convince me I am worth anything in the ways I think they will in the moment.

Which is where Jesus enters the story ... annoyingly.

Jesus shows us that these strong at the expense of the weak, rich at the expense of the poor, good at the expense of the bad ways of being together debases everyone involved. The bully is as dehumanized by bullying as the victim.

In our win-lose way of understanding things it would have made a lot more sense for Jesus to have come and be a superhero, kicking butt and taking names. Showing everyone how strong God is by winning at our game.

Instead, at the cross we see that Jesus came and showed us how strong God is by voluntarily losing at our game.

No wonder people kept yelling "save yourself." If you are God, then have some self-respect." Because that's what we would do. But that's the thing about God. God doesn't seem nearly as interested in self-preservation as we are. God isn't self-preserving, God is, by nature, self-giving ... not in the way that keeps abused women abused. But in the way that loves the abused and the abuser. Which is to say, God is self-giving in ways that don't seem to make a lot of sense to our ideas of win-lose, right-wrong, insider-outsider.

And that's the reign of Christ.

He'd been trying to tell us this the whole time: by having a mom without status, and there being no room in the Inn for his birth, and by gathering around him, not a team of all-stars, but a motley crew of losers and then pissing THEM off by also insisting on eating with the winners anyway. He tried to teach us maddening things - things that destabilize our systems of trying to get-over on people by saying that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. If you want to find your life then lose it. The greatest among you must become servants. If someone slaps you offer him or her the other cheek as well. If someone asks for your coat, give him or her your shirt too. Why? Because like being right about everything ... It doesn't matter. All of this losing can happen and we will still be ok.

None of this losing matters because the source of our worth, the source of our dignity, the source of our lovability does not lie in the - who is right who is wrong, who is good who is bad, who wins and who loses game. Our worth, dignity and lovability lies in Genesis 1 :26 and our having been created in the image of God.

I think this Imago Dei, this image of God, creates in us a longing for what is real and

beautiful and redemptive. And even as we are drawn to self-preservation and the game of winners and losers, there is something in us that always knows it's all a lie.

I think this is why, despite the countless stories of revenge that could be told, that story from 2006 of the shooting at an Amish school continues to be told and continues to pull at that place inside all of us, the Imago Dei, reign of Christ, kingdom of heaven place that longs for the Gospel. On October 2, 2006, Charles Roberts walked into a one-room Amish schoolhouse and shot 10 young girls before taking his own life. The response of the Amish community was not one of self-preservation, saving themselves, revenge, or winning in any way. The response was one of pure Gospel and this is why it is still told to this day. We recognize the real thing when we see it.

Amish community members affected by the shooting offered forgiveness. They refused to hate. Instead they visited and comforted the shooter's widow. Reportedly, "one Amish man held the shooter's sobbing father in his arms, for as long as an hour, to comfort him."

I may feed my desire to be right, to get over on others, to make people who have harmed me pay for what they've done by narcotically consuming movies, TV shows and video games that indulge my revenge fantasies. But it's an empty high and then I crash. But the reign of Christ is significantly quieter than a Jean Claude Van Dam movie.

Jesus of Nazareth kept saying the kingdom of God is like things that are hidden and small and easily missed. He also said that the kingdom of God is within you. Quiet, hidden, small, easily missed. But unmistakably THERE. There within the image of God, from which you were created, is the kingdom of heaven, wanting to be known, wanting to be expressed, wanting to be lived and absolutely lighting up when it hears the real thing. Within it is your beauty, your value, and your dignity. And it has absolutely nothing to do with being right, or making your point, or saving yourself or winning or losing.

Catholic theologian James Alison puts it this way - he claims that at the cross it is as if God is saying to us:

"I'll occupy that space of loserdom to show you that I'm not out to get you, that I really do like you. Then you need no longer engage in that awful business of making yourselves good over against, or by comparison with each other. Instead you can relax about being good, and as you relax you will find yourselves becoming something much better, much richer in humanity than you can possibly imagine."

And I have to believe that the Image of God within us, that source of our worth and dignity and lovability from where our longing for truth and beauty comes - is nourished and honored every time we come here, and once again hear that we are loved like crazy by this crucified God who doesn't mind losing.

This, brothers and sister, this is the reign of Christ. It is within you. And the true source of your dignity, worth and lovability ... and nothing else matters. Not really. So relax and find yourselves becoming something much richer in humanity than you can possibly imagine. Alleluia. Amen.