

Isaiah 43:16-21 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹⁶ Thus says the LORD,
 who makes a way in the sea,
 a path in the mighty waters,
¹⁷ who brings out chariot and horse,
 army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
 they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
¹⁸ Do not remember the former things,
 or consider the things of old.
¹⁹ I am about to do a new thing;
 now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
 and rivers in the desert.
²⁰ The wild animals will honor me,
 the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
 rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
²¹ the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

Mary Anoints Jesus

12 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them^[a] with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii^[b] and the money given to the poor?" ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it^[c] so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

The Plot to Kill Lazarus

⁹When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

April 4, 2019

Isaiah 43:16-21; John 12:1-8

Kerra Becker English

For the Love of Friends

Generous God, whose Son Jesus Christ enjoyed the friendship and hospitality of Mary, Martha and Lazarus of Bethany: Open our hearts to love you, our ears to hear you, and our hands to welcome and serve you in others, through Jesus Christ our risen Lord; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

The question that is always building, building, building during Lent is WHY? Why does Jesus do the things that take him toward his own death? Why does he keep preaching so provocatively knowing that it angers his religious peers? Why does he allow rumors to be spread about his power that strike fear into the hearts of rulers who then want him eliminated? Why doesn't he lay low for awhile, settle down, take a wife, stop right there in Bethany with his closest friends and become the teacher everyone loves OUTSIDE of the city?

One of the presumptions that Christianity has made over the course of codifying its tradition is that Jesus had to die. Jesus died as payment for our sins. I know you've heard that line before. It was what he came to do, right? We needed a Savior. And somehow the saving part wouldn't be able to happen without God's anger at our sin being vanquished. There are certainly lines in scripture and in the old hymns about being saved by the blood of Jesus. Paul's letters speak to the totality of his

turn around after meeting the risen Christ on the Damascus road. Jesus' death saved Paul from self-destruction, and probably we too recognize the strange combination of fear and gratitude that comes from this theological assertion, saying "Yes, Jesus died to save me from my sin." I must say I find it curious when people say that line with such glee. Rather it strikes fear into my heart to even entertain that God's anger couldn't be satisfied without such a gory payment, and yet it gives me an enormous love and appreciation for Jesus that he would take on such pain for me to be forgiven and reconciled with the God of all creation.

Oddly, reliance on that singular interpretation of why Jesus faced the cross is precisely what allows for the build-up of manipulative power in the church. It does so by keeping its members afraid of who God is, and therefore afraid of those who are then sanctified to lead the church. I'm not saying that it's not AN interpretation. But I believe it to be faulty if we consider the punitive interpretation of the cross to be our ONLY interpretation of why Jesus faced such a cruel punishment in his life.

That's why – today – we will be using the Jesus section of the Confession of 1967 as an affirmation of faith. It affirms what I've always preferred to affirm about God's reconciling act in Jesus Christ. It is a mystery. While it is not completely unknown – we have clues in scripture and insights from our own experience of who God is – it still cannot be completely known either. It is worthy of our reflection, our contemplation, our yearly Lent and Holy Week walk with Jesus into the belly of the beast. Because I think that if Jesus only died to save us from our sin, and that's all, perhaps that death was in vain. Scaring people with the threat of hell isn't going to bring people back to church. Saying the "sinner's prayer" doesn't automatically turn someone into a follower of Jesus Christ (at least not in my book.) Though I must say that a few groups have tried to convert me with that one in my day. Ultimately, we don't decide to be good out of fear of God's punishment. And

sin still abounds in this world. I personally do not believe it is the church's job to "save souls from punishment." I think the church's job in the world is to tell the compelling story of God's love for humankind so that the people God loves will be able to live their lives knowing the love God has for them in the midst of a broken, hurting, sin-filled world.

What, then, this time around does the Passion of Jesus Christ have to teach us? Beyond that. In addition to that. The Confession of 1967 adds to its mystery language the following: *It is called the sacrifice of a lamb, a shepherd's life given for his sheep, atonement by a priest; again, it is ransom of a slave, payment of debt, vicarious satisfaction of a legal penalty, and victory over the powers of evil. These are expressions of a truth which remains beyond the reach of all theory in the depths of God's love for humankind. They reveal the gravity, cost, and sure achievement of God's reconciling work. **The risen Christ is the savior of all people.***

To me it is important to consider all these understandings of reconciliation – but there is one that comes from Jesus himself in John's gospel that I return to often, and find compelling beyond far beyond the punitive interpretations that have seemed to be the "only way" for far too long. In John's gospel, Jesus talks several times about laying down *his own* life. Rather than him being sent to die in our stead, he talks as though his life were his own to give. It's where the shepherd laying down his life for his sheep comes from. And what's even more powerful is that it's also a consideration he asks his disciples to make. Jesus says, and I quote, "No one has a greater love than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends."

What if? What if we turn our eyes toward Jerusalem in absolute love, this kind of love, a love that is filled with the joyful intimacy and the frequent heartache of diving deeply into friendship with other human beings? What if Jesus were free to make the choice, albeit the circumstances of his birth and the right place/right time of his upbringing and the love and courage he found in religious teaching seemed to be the preparation he would need to follow through on such a powerful calling? What if

his stop in Bethany was the final reminder he needed of just how important his mission to speak on behalf of God's love was supposed to be?

This passage is an intimate, really intimate description of friendship, the kind of friendship Jesus spoke about being willing to die for. First off, Jesus comes to this home, maybe unannounced, six days before a major holiday. He does so assuming that he has a bed to sleep in, and that he won't be a burden to the friends that he's popped in on. But these aren't just any old friends. These are his best friends. How do I know this? It's Lazarus – who Jesus called out of the tomb. It's Martha who is willing to stretch whatever she has on hand for Jesus – even knowing that he ALWAYS travels with a bunch of his students in tow. And it's Mary's touch that almost seems too close, too private for us to read about in scripture.

Mary lavishes the feet of Jesus with pure nard, a perfume that was both fragrant AND expensive. Then she dries his feet with her hair. I don't think this was a common custom that just seems weird to us because it happened so long ago. It's an act of vulnerability and intimacy that shocks those who saw it happen. In both John and Luke's versions of this story – eyes are immediately averted as if they are seeing something that should be happening in private, not in the same room where everyone else has gathered for pre-dinner conversation.

Judas, of course, wants to talk about the money wasted. To the uninitiated, extravagant love can often look like such a waste. You could have helped so many more poor people Jesus – if you hadn't let Mary do this.

But then the crowds began to hear that Jesus had arrived in Bethany, and that he was hanging out with Lazarus. They wanted to see this too. They wanted to touch the man they knew was dead who is now living and hanging out with his dear old friend. This too is an act of intimacy, vulnerability – the dead coming back to life. Who has the kind of loving authority to make that so?

The tension is building. You can feel it in the story. From here forward, Jesus will talk more and more about how he's going to die, and he doesn't have a terrible illness, and he isn't a convicted criminal, and when he does talk about his relationship with God – it isn't about being a sacrifice so much as it is about how close they are and how much they want the world to know about the depths of love that the divine has for all of humanity. Jesus talks about himself as a ransom for many in other gospels, but not here. In John's gospel – he is pure love, poured out just like that perfume, for his closest of friends.

Something about that is even more compelling to me than thinking about Jesus "paying the price." And I suspect that something is what truly got him killed. I think we have to ask the question, "What was so threatening about Jesus?" If we don't, I don't think we really understand what the Passion was all about. There have been others who threatened political power or religious authority. I don't doubt that many have been harassed and even persecuted for that. Some have even gotten themselves killed refusing to be pawns for the church or state.

But Jesus' message – No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. This, this is different. This is complete and total recognition that love is stronger than death, more powerful than the grave. Again – another favorite and associated scripture text in my mind. You can't obliterate love, not even with Roman torture and execution. Love and friendship, vulnerability and intimacy – we scandalize those gifts as weak or unimportant when they are precisely the forces that unite human beings in cooperation with the holiness that is bigger than everything else. It's easy to believe in God through Christ. It's threatening to know God in Jesus Christ. It's sometimes considered blasphemy to recognize the living Christ in each other – but that's exactly what Jesus was showing us – the spark of the divine in all people. And he had a unique way of valuing all by being close, really close with a few and letting us be observers of what holy friendship can truly be.

The Celtic tradition of Christianity adopted much from the gospel of John as they passed down their understanding of theology through tradition and practice, and their understanding of the faith was nearly lost to us as heretical as the Roman empire marched its way through the British Isles. But the Celts put high value on nature, and friendship, and intimacy - over ritual, and hierarchies, and regulations. The Celtic tradition has an allure that speaks to me – even as I have been trained in the streams of Western Christianity that called much of its writings suspect.

The good news is that we have a number of ways to draw upon the wider, broader tradition of the Church and all its various threads now. AND we have the same scriptures to help us see where each of them found strength, and courage, and understanding. We have unearthed, or maybe more appropriately re-earthed the conversation and brought the wisdom of such ancient traditions back into the conversation. John O'Donohue who is one such writer in the Celtic Christian tradition offers a book of blessings that I find especially meaningful, and his one on friendship is a gift.

He says:

May you be blessed with good friends, and learn to be a good friend to yourself,

Journeying to that place in your soul where there is love, warmth, and feeling.

May this change you.

May it transfigure what is negative, distant, or cold within your heart.

May you be brought into real passion, kindness, and belonging.

May you treasure your friends.

May you be good to them, be there for them and receive all the challenges, truth and light you need.

May you never be isolated, but know the embrace of your anam cara (your soul friend).

O'Donohue understands how much our friends make a difference in our lives. This may be family who are friends, or friends who become as close as family. For the love of friendship, Jesus gave his life. He knew the love would not contract – even with his death. No, it would explode into the world and continue to touch minds and hearts with exactly what God intended – for love to always have the loudest laugh in the room. No one can take that away.

So – this is another facet of the Passion story – a story that is both a mystery and a marvel. Ponder the love you have for friends. Ponder the love your friends have for you. And know that Jesus Christ described the love that would go to any lengths for those friendships as holy. And he described that love with his eyes set toward Jerusalem. Amen.