

The Cost of Love
John 18-19, selected verses; Common English Bible
March 24, 2024
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Judas brought a company of soldiers and some guards from the chief priests and Pharisees. They came there carrying lanterns, torches, and weapons. Jesus knew everything that was to happen to him, so he went out and asked, **“Who are you looking for?”**

They answered, “Jesus the Nazarene.”

He said to them, **“I Am.”** When he said, “I Am,” they shrank back and fell to the ground. He asked them again, **“Who are you looking for?”**

They said, “Jesus the Nazarene.”

Jesus answered, **“I told you, ‘I Am.’ If you are looking for me, then let these people go.”**

Then the company of soldiers, the commander, and the guards from the religious leaders took Jesus into custody. The chief priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. Jesus answered, **“I’ve always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where everyone gathers. I’ve said nothing in private. Why ask me? Ask those who heard what I told them.”**

Then the Jewish leaders led Jesus to the Roman governor’s palace. Pilate went out to them and asked, “What charge do you bring against this man?” They answered, “If he had done nothing wrong, we wouldn’t have handed him over to you.” Pilate responded, “Take him yourselves and judge him according to your Law.” The Jewish leaders replied, “The Law doesn’t allow us to kill anyone.” (This was so that Jesus’ word might be fulfilled when he indicated how he was going to die.) Pilate summoned Jesus and asked, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

Jesus replied, **“My kingdom doesn’t originate from this world. If it did, my guards would fight so that I wouldn’t have been arrested by the Jewish leaders. My kingdom isn’t from here.”**

“So you are a king?” Pilate said.

Jesus answered, **“You say that I am a king. I was born and came into the world for this reason: to testify to the truth. Whoever accepts the truth listens to my voice.”**

“What is truth?” Pilate asked. Then Pilate had Jesus taken and whipped. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and dressed him in a purple robe. Over and over they went up to him and said, “Greetings, king of the Jews!” And they slapped him in the face.

When Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, "Here's the man." When the chief priests and their deputies saw him, they shouted out, "Crucify, crucify! We have a Law, and according to this Law he ought to die because he made himself out to be God's Son." When Pilate heard this word, he was even more afraid. He went back into the residence and spoke to Jesus, "Where are you from?" Jesus didn't answer. So Pilate said, "You won't speak to me? Don't you know that I have authority to release you and also to crucify you?"

Jesus replied, "**You would have no authority over me if it had not been given to you from above.**" From that moment on, Pilate wanted to release Jesus.

However, the Jewish leaders cried out, saying, "If you release this man, you aren't a friend of the emperor! Anyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes the emperor!" Pilate responded, "What? Do you want me to crucify your king?" "We have no king except the emperor," the chief priests answered. Then Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified.

The soldiers took Jesus prisoner. Carrying his cross by himself, he went out to a place called Skull Place (in Aramaic, *Golgotha*). That's where they crucified him. Jesus' mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene stood near the cross. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "**Here is your son.**" Then he said to the disciple, "**Here is your mother.**" And from that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

After this, knowing that everything was already completed, in order to fulfill the scripture, Jesus said, "**I am thirsty.**" A jar full of sour wine was nearby, so the soldiers soaked a sponge in it, placed it on a hyssop branch, and held it up to his lips. When he had received the sour wine, Jesus said, "**It is completed.**" Bowing his head, he gave up his life.

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How did that feel to say Jesus' words? What did you notice?

It's a strange story, isn't it? The whole thing, I mean. From Bethlehem to here. And this is the strangest part of the whole Jesus story to me—the crucifixion. It's an execution, a state-sanctioned lynching. It's the sort of thing you'd think his followers would want to leave out, or at least gloss over. Let's get to the resurrection part, the win.

But the story of Jesus has never been told without including it. If there's a truly distinctive thing in the Christian story, this is it. We worship a god who dies. No other religion does that, really.

Some later tellings of the story try to clean it up. It only *looked* like Jesus died up there. But the cannon and Christian orthodoxy of all varieties insists, no, he really did die.

Jesus is well attested as a historical person. There's no real argument to be made that he didn't exist. A lot of the rest of the story is debatable, but not this part. This is pretty

much as certain as we can get about something in the ancient world: Jesus was a real person and he died. Who worships a god like that?

John, at first glance, does seem to temper it a bit. The other gospels emphasize his victimhood, his despair, his humanity. In John, it's more like Jesus is presiding over the whole thing, like the cross is his throne. That always put me off, because it felt less human, less real.

That had always been the thing that bothered me about Jesus in the gospel of John. He's so regal and is always going around talking about how he came straight from God. But reading it together over the last three months, I realized I was only seeing half of the story. Yes, John is the gospel where it directly claims Jesus was divine, but it is also the gospel that 100% insists he really was flesh and blood. The gospel of John is fully committed to living in the paradox: Jesus is all God and all human.

In the crucifixion story, John leans into the divine part. Jesus is full of dignity and defiance and says, "I lay down my life. No one takes it from me." He looks Pilate in the eye and says, "You have no power over me." He carries his own cross. He decides when it's finished. He presides. He treats that cross like a throne.

And by leaning into the divine part John is insisting it really is God who is executed, lynched, who dies up there on that cross. This God we see in Jesus really is human.

It's hard to be human. Our bodies betray us. They break down. They embarrass us. Our feelings get hurt. We can't actually do everything. We're limited.

We do all sorts of things to try to avoid facing that. We all know we're going to die, but I think we all also, at least for part of our lives, kind of secretly believe that if we do the right things, eat the right food, live the right way we'll somehow be immune, we'll outrun death.

I love my illusions of control and self-sufficiency. I hate being weak or sick. I do not like admitting I need help. Things usually have to get really bad before I admit I can't actually do it all. Maybe you can relate. Deep down part of us just doesn't want to be human.

But Jesus bleeds when he's cut. He falls down when he carries something heavy. He dies. He's human.

In John especially he fully, consciously accepts that. He doesn't fight it.

He's not passive. Not by a long shot. He chooses to accept what's happening. He's made deliberate choices all along the way. He drew together a community that did not conform to the dominant social order of the day. He refused to behave appropriately. He rolled his eyes in the face of authority. He wasn't nice—kind, yes, but not nice, polite, well-behaved. Everybody's got choices. And Jesus made conscious choices, even when the consequences were clear.

My dad's second career was as a criminal defense attorney. Mostly defense attorneys lose. Mostly the government wins. He once described his work to me as helping people lose on their own terms.

That's what Jesus does in the gospel of John. He loses on his own terms.

God Almighty is willing to be human. Jesus counts the cost and is willing to bear it. He bears the cost of love.

I don't think we can be fully human, fully made in the image of God without choosing to love. And choosing to love opens us to grief and pain and loss.

Being fully human includes facing the suffering that comes to every one of us and choosing to love anyway.

Whether we're choosing to love by having a tender heart that breaks at the pain of the world, or choosing to love by fighting for justice because we really love our neighbors, or choosing to love by embracing the risk of real relationship, really loving—which is to say really being human—opens us to suffering.

I don't know why it's that way, why suffering is part of the equation. I don't believe God wills suffering, wants us to have to face pain. It's just apparently one of the givens in the world. There is suffering. And being human means facing it. Choosing to love means counting the cost and choosing it anyway.

That's what happens on the cross. God counts the cost and is willing to bear it. God is consents to being fully human. If there's something about the cross that saves us, I believe this is it: the power and love that holds the cosmos together joins us in our human powerlessness and pain. The Creator commits. Loves us and loves us to the end. And in doing so shows us the way to life, life that is abundant and true and that cannot ever really die.

Do we dare to follow? To admit we're human? To count the cost and choose to love anyway? Apparently it's in love that amazing, that divine that we encounter Christ. That, friends, is the gospel.

- Sarah W. Wiles, 2024