

Crosses and Losses

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I Corinthians 1: 18-25

John 2: 23-25

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When Debbie and our children and I left my first solo pastorate in Central Texas, a small group of our closest female friends spent months making for us a beautiful quilt. The pattern was called crosses and losses. Positive and negative spaces of fabric in quiet neutral colors reminded us of the warmth and comfort of the deep relationships we had enjoyed and the costs of change.

None of us imagined that the joys and comforts of that fellowship which flowed naturally from our friendship would last forever. We recognized even while we were lavished with love that we were enjoying a precious rare moment watching our children (all roughly the same age) play together as we sat talking and laughing over a bottle of white wine and played Trivial Pursuit until late in the evening as our kids were bedded down in the next room. We knew each others' foibles and faults. We laughed at and with one another. We shared times of worry and pain. And eventually we wept when we parted. But, as we all know, grief is the price tag life puts on love. And love is worth the cost.

What none of us in that little group of friends probably realized then were the deeper implications of this insight, an insight that goes straight to the heart of the teachings of Jesus: *Creation is a constant flow of change. That is its natural and normal state. Unchanging, static, perfect states of affairs are a dangerous and seductive illusion on this earth.*

Jesus tried to teach his followers that the reign of God or the kingdom of heaven was within them. It was not a political state. It was not a perfect, unchanging earthly utopia. Some few got it. Most never did.

This beautiful life, this beloved life, this precious life of wonder and joy is also and at the very same time the realm of crosses and losses.

Clinging desperately to comfort, security, stability, even happiness, leads to woe, that "woe" which the writer Henry Melville said is "madness." We may joke about the Christian mountain-climber who is recovering in ICU after putting into practice his belief in "Letting Go, Letting God," but we also know that keeping a lighter hold on all of life is the path to sanity and faithfulness.

A few days ago:

It had been a tough day. I won't relate to you what happened, but things said and done that day disturbed me, haunted me. "Hungry ghosts" rose from their restless tombs and reopened

old wounds in my mind. My mind just kept turning the incidents and things said over and over. There were all sorts of painful feelings, that I kept kindled by attaching old narratives to them.

That evening Debbie and I watched a really good mystery on Amazon. I was hoping to distract myself from the pain I felt. And, for a while I was distracted.

When we went to bed, I finished William Kent Krueger's brilliant novel, "Ordinary Grace," hoping that slumber would follow.

But you know what happened. When I turned out the light around midnight, those "hungry ghosts" were waiting for me. I tossed and turned, blaming the pillows for my head not resting.

Debbie could tell I was tossing and turning. No matter how big or firm the bed is, it can't disguise that. She asked, "Are you okay?" After a long moment, I said, "I feel bruised." I kept trying to sleep, but after trying for what seemed like ages, finally I got up and went downstairs and made a cup of hot milk.

The old blues man says that when you've got the blues nothing helps but the blues. Those of you who know William Kent Krueger's novel "Ordinary Grace," the novel I finished that night, know it turns around one of the most famous passages in Greek tragedy, a passage from Aeschylus.

That passage goes like this: "*He who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep pain, which cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart, until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.*"

I went out to the family room and pulled a translation of the plays of Aeschylus off the shelf, I turned to "Agamemnon," and curled up to read. Somewhere between the elegant introductory essay and the opening chorus, something dawned on me. I already knew it. But it *dawned* on me just like a new idea because I had been avoiding it: *we cannot deal with reality by trying to escape it.*

Distracting ourselves may mean we go for a pleasant drive, but the distraction drops us off right back where it picked us up. If we want out, we have to go through.

And so I sat in the silence of the night and I let myself feel what I was trying to avoid feeling; I felt the force of grief, which as C. S. Lewis once said, feels very much like fear; I felt frustration and anger, which is fear's most common product; I allowed myself to face and name and look carefully at each of the things I felt, pondering them, examining them, turning them over, trying to feel compassion for these painful feelings and for myself for feeling them. And when I was able, I tracked the "hungry ghosts" back to their tombs, their "whitened sepulchers" and found them "full of dead bones," and I laid the ghosts down with all the compassion I could muster. And, drowsy, finally, I went back to bed.

St. Paul, a Jewish man himself, at war with his fellow teachers of Judaism over the identity of the Messiah, argued that Jews seek miracles. Well, lots of people do. I've met people who pray that God will find them a parking place on a crowded street. And I've known intellectuals who demand that God play parlor tricks to prove he's for real. But you and I know that magical thinking isn't the same as faith.

St. Paul, a Roman citizen and an educated man, who was current enough with Greek philosophy to adapt some of it for his sermons, argued that Greeks love wisdom. But he knew too that the high mark of Greek wisdom placed reality in a realm of idealism disconnected from the material world. And, as attractive as this might appear, Paul is far too loyal to the Torah and to reality to believe it.

What Paul sees as power and wisdom has frankly stumped not only Jews and Greeks, but the Church universal, and every other faith on earth, and every civil government, and every army that has ever marched, and every academy that has ever been founded even those that call themselves Christian. Paul says clearly and unambiguously that *"Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."*

And I'm not sure I've ever known anyone wise enough to believe consistently that this is true.

I asked someone when I was a kid why we Protestants don't have Jesus on the cross. "Because we believe he rose from the dead," I was told. It didn't occur to me till much later that Christians who have Jesus on their crucifixes believe in the resurrection just as much as Protestants do. Are we Protestants more squeamish, or less morbid, or maybe we just don't know what to do with a God who reigns in our hearts *not despite* the cross, but *from* the cross?

And on that cross, the whole life of this man Jesus is distilled and amplified. He is vulnerable to the point of death. He accepted the blows of creatures, though our faith says he is the Logos through whom all creation was made. He suffered the indignities of bearing a guilt of which he knows he is not guilty, the humiliation of being ostracized from his people and abandoned by his followers. "Today you will be with me in paradise," he tells a thief. "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing," he says of all of those who conspired to get him out of the way. He does not return evil for evil.

He asunders himself from his natural family, from his mother and brothers, to give birth to a larger family, then hands over the care of his mother to one of his followers. I wonder if Mary ever understood. Hanging there between heaven and earth he did not need to build a utopia, a worldly kingdom of heaven, because he carried the reign of God inside him.

The way he dies puts an explanation point on all that he said and all that he did before. This is power. This is wisdom. And God places his stamp of approval on this life lived toward this end. "Victory in Jesus" the revivalists sing, but what does it mean that our union with Christ is not a way out of the sufferings, the ordinary trials, the pain, the torment of ordinary life, sustained in our vulnerability by the awful, ordinary grace of God. In the midst of this life, and through the travails of this life, the cross of Jesus calls us.

Someplace between "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" and "*Father, into thy hands I entrust my spirit*" lies the sacred wisdom we need if we wish to live sanely and faithfully.

How do we come to this wisdom and power of God? Through the fires and anvils and hammering of life itself, through its disappointments, its heartbreaks and betrayals, its loves and losses, triumphs and joys, its inconstancy and mutability, its small dramas and large tragedies. Awake. Asleep. Awake when we wish we were sleeping. And sleeping when all the ghosts we try keep to locked away, rise to haunt our dreams. Drop by drop.

Amen.