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"It is not the physical death of Jesus which saves us, but the absoluteness of a love which did not count death too high a price."

I have quoted those lines in the past, from a Jesuit writer named Mark Link. I have long misplaced or lent out the book in which I read them, but something about this way of expressing *the meaning behind* the Cross has stuck with me for more than 30 years.

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It is a curious mixture of love and death, just like in the movies, I suppose. And if pressed on it, most of us would admit that we do not understand the connection. Perhaps we have not loved enough, or bled enough for our love, to understand how anyone can lay down his life, or let it be taken away from us.

And although it seems misplaced, another movie comes to my mind—the story of Romeo and Juliet, a love story like no other, which ends of course in double tragedy, each of the lovers giving up their lives for the other in the vain hope of saving their love. What catches at our throats is that the running feud—between two prominent families of Verona, the Montagues and the Capulets—is brought to a jarring halt with the tragic deaths of their beautiful children.

Shakespeare's eloquent play comes to an end before his characters fully grasp, or understand, the significance of either love or death.

The followers of Jesus also struggled to understand both the love and the death of Jesus. Why would he submit? Why did he place himself in danger's way? Why did he feel it both important and inevitable to go up against the evil forces that were threatened by his speaking peace, and curing diseases, forgiving sins, and feeding the masses? Why?

In the Scriptures, the "why" is answered, although you have to know where to look. It is not spelled out in the Passion history as it was just read, but in the reading for last night, for Maundy Thursday, when Jesus was very much alive, and sitting at table in the Upper Room with his faithful followers. "No one has greater love," he told them, "than to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Or in the words of Mark Link, "It is not the physical death of Jesus which saves us, but the absoluteness of a love which did not count death too high a price."

And in the Biblical economy, it is a death more jarring, more shocking than that of two young lovers, a Romeo and Juliet, because in the death of Jesus, God and humanity represent the two sides separated by a running feud. God, who calls for righteousness, faithfulness and justice from his people, and God's people who are unrighteous, faithless and unjust—who not only fail to live up to God's high standards but who prefer to break off the entire relationship rather than be reminded of our shortcomings and our failings. Our love story with Almighty God is most often a one-sided story, in which God does all the loving, and humanity wants none of it. Or, God offers love unconditionally, but we are interested in it only on condition that we make no commitments whatever.

But in the midst of this running feud, this on-again, off-again love relationship between humanity and its creator, there is this shocking death, this terrible, awe-ful moment in which Jesus takes us, and God's love into his own wide embrace. As a gift, as a sacrifice, he voluntarily gives up his life.

His disciples saw him as God's son because on the Cross he expressed—that is, he acted out—God's willingness to let all other issues go, and to accept our faithlessness, to absorb the pain of our unrighteousness, to bear punishment for our sins.

I am wearing a small crucifix around my neck. There is another in the Chancel. There is another in the Sacristy. We are used to seeing this artistic representation of Jesus on the Cross—so used to it that the shock value of blood, pain and death are usually not on our minds.

But this death, this man upon the cross who carries to God our pain and our sins, is set within a context—one which is easy to forget if we do not re-read the whole Passion Story again:

Jesus was crucified by the authorities, executed, first-century Roman-style with an unimaginable brutality. The scene at Calvary is not only one man on a Cross, but three men, three crosses. The other two, we are told, are criminals who were executed because there was zero tolerance by the authorities for their crimes, and because the rulers wanted to make an example of them. In a world ruled by terror and oppression, death is the answer to every social problem, to resistance, and to all dissent. Some of us are old enough to remember the Chinese Communist warlord Mao Tse Tung. We may never have read this from his darkened view of things. Chairman Mao is reported to have said, "I believe the whole world can be re-made with a gun." If we are willing to kill every enemy, to annihilate whole populations, to silence all dissent, we *can rule* the world with absolute terror.

And while in its day the Roman Empire did the same thing with a sword and a cross, God Almighty has chosen not to rule the world with terror. But in the heart and soul of Christian piety, while we contemplate the Cross and pray thoughtfully about the love of God in Jesus Christ for laying down his life for us, we should not lose sight of this event, this scene, this context as the playing out of capital punishment, and what that might tell us about ourselves.

The death of Jesus was not the first time, nor the last, when someone totally innocent was executed anyway. The death of the two unnamed thieves—one remorseful and penitent for his crime, and the other defiant—was not the last time either that criminals have gone to their death one way or another.

But if we genuinely believe that Jesus was innocent, that he was executed wrongly, and if we genuinely believe that anyone can repent and turn to God in contrition and turn his life around, how can we believe that the death penalty can fix our social problems today, when it never has fixed any problems in any time or any culture or society?

The larger context of the death of Jesus which also ought to jar us and shock us, is the context of his life. As we have seen, week in and week out in the readings and the liturgies of the church, Jesus was born into poverty; as an infant he became a refugee in a foreign country; as an adult he was essentially a homeless migrant who survived on the generosity of bleeding hearts who gave him and his friends a few bucks to buy their next meal. Jesus was misunderstood, he forgave the prostitutes, forgave the sinners, healed the lame and blind and sick; and when he challenged the prevailing pious attitudes of his day he was held in suspicion, tracked, betrayed, arrested and condemned.

The reason, my dear friends, that the Gospel stories explain these things in such detail, is to teach us something we should be applying to our world today: that if Jesus was born to poverty, we should rethink our prejudices against the poor; if Jesus was a refugee in a foreign land, we should rethink our contempt of foreigners and our cold-heartedness for refugees; if Jesus was homeless, we should re-examine our lack of caring for the homeless of our day; if Jesus was misunderstood, we should seek to understand others with compassion. If Jesus forgave sinners and even prostitutes, we should not be condemning others, maybe not even those who make their living in those ways today.

If Jesus cared deeply for the lame and the blind and the sick, we should not be trying to deny them health coverage and medical care today. And if Jesus could be so abused, betrayed, arrested and executed when it was clear as day to see that he was innocent, we should be giving hard thought to our own criminal justice system and how it abuses, betrays, sentences and even executes people for whom Christ died.

The shocking, jarring death of Jesus stands up against all our judgmentalism, our rejecting and punishing attitudes, and dares to stop them in their tracks with love. It is not a shrinking, sentimental love. It is not the love of pleasant feelings and chemistry between two romantics like Romeo and Juliet. It is the love which takes on all risks, withstands all challenges, sets no conditions and pays any price necessary to redeem the world.

This is why the fellowship of Jesus' followers asks so much of you. We usually call it "the Church," but that's what it really is—a "fellowship of those who follow Jesus." It doesn't ask much of you because of some mistaken notion that you have to be real strict for God to love you, and you can't step out of line or commit a sin. Let's get this straight, shall we? Your sins—all of them, and even the ones you haven't thought of, or tried yet—are forgiven because God has decided to cancel them, erase them and forget them for the sake of the Cross. And you don't *ever need to do anything* to earn or win God's love, because God in Christ has already decided to love you unconditionally.

But what is asked of you is to look at the love of God we see upon the Cross, and be so shocked and jarred that we stop in our tracks, and learn what it means to take risks for Christ, to face challenges, to pay any price to help redeem the world. *No one*—absolutely *no one* is outside the wide embrace of God. No one is beyond redemption. In your ministry—your daily service—and in mine, we give up on no one because God has not given up, either.

Give this a moment of thought, when you bring something for our food pantry, or write a check, or cut some slack to the other driver, or volunteer for something in the community, or when you vote: it is not the physical death of Jesus which redeems the world in our times, either. It is the absoluteness of love which will pay any price to change hearts, change lives, and change the world. Amen?