

## Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord, Cycle B

Philippians 2:6-11; and Mark 14:1-15:47

My daughter Laura's birth mom left when Laura was fifteen months old. I became her mother when she was eight. After a honeymoon phase, Laura gave me a run for my money. She repeatedly made sure she hurt me before I could hurt her. I often wanted to leave and I was not always the best mother, but I stubbornly kept loving her. It was what she needed. Through God's grace, we are very close today. The wounds I received do not compare to the joy I have in loving her and being loved by her.

Likely, you have similar tales of ferociously loving someone who needed it badly. To love and be loved is what we all want at our core. That is because God is Love itself and we are God's image. Two realities follow this truth. First, love involves placing others first, not just when all our needs are met, but right now, in this moment. Jesus summed it up in last week's gospel: "Whoever loves their life loses it and whoever hates their life in this world will preserve it for life eternal." Real love sacrifices everything for others. This is *agape*, one of the three Greek words for love; unlike romantic love or friendly love, it is concern for the dignity of others and that means everyone.

Our stories echo the story of Jesus' love. Mark lays out starkly Jesus' suffering. Others plot against him. The leaders of his faith reject him. His closest male friends betray and abandon him. His trials are a sham. No one defends him and he is utterly alone. He is tortured so badly he cannot carry his cross. He is stripped and hung as a spectacle to be mocked. He endures the infamy of capital punishment. He suffocates slowly over six hours. See the vast sorrow of his pain, loneliness and humiliation!

The chief priests and the scribes mock him: "He saved others; he cannot save himself." Ironically, the way to save others is to stay on the cross, because real love sometimes gets you killed. To get off the cross Jesus would have had to admit that all he had preached and lived was wrong, that compassion is *not* the only criterion for action. The religious leaders had plotted to kill him since he cured a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. Was that and everything since wrong?

We need the love of Jesus. We need to know that he knows what it is like to be abandoned, bullied, mocked. When we are beaten, suffocated, stripped naked, betrayed by those closest to us or standing defenseless, Jesus understands and loves us. God is with us in our suffering and that is no small thing. It is what gets us through. This is why God bestows on Jesus the name above every other name and all our knees should bend. His perfect love transforms the world.

But – and here is the second reality that accompanies the fundamental need to love and be loved – we have a hard time loving. Mark portrays in the other characters in the Passion all that draws us away from love. The chief priests and scribes have rejected Jesus' love all along because it will disturb their power in a corrupt system built on violence and the accumulation of wealth. Love would overturn all that. We see Judas who prefers keeping secrets and lying to advance his agenda, so life goes the way he wants it to go. Peter thinks himself Jesus' faithful friend, but he will not deny his own need for sleep to pray, either for himself in the face of pending trauma or for his friend, who needs him. Relying only on himself and not on God, Peter crumples in the firelight when others ask about his allegiance. Even now, we push Jesus away for these same reasons, but Jesus keeps loving us. That is what we all need.

Lest we give up on our ability to love, Mark weaves in characters who manage to love Jesus in his suffering. As the inevitability of arrest and death looms, a lone woman recognizes Jesus' troubled spirit and anoints him. The foreigner, Simon of Cyrene, carries Jesus' cross. A bystander gives him a drink on the cross. His female friends, so insignificant in this male-dominated culture, stay near him as he hangs for six hours; they risk their own lives for him. Joseph of Arimathea courageously asks Pilate for the body. You and I, small and imperfect at loving as we are, can care for the dignity of others even when the stakes are high. The great Love that is God makes it possible; let every knee bend!

- ❖ Have you ever loved someone who was hard to love?
- ❖ Which part of Jesus' story sounds like yours?