

“Life and Death”
John 12:20-33
Andrew Foster Connors
5th Sunday in Lent
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Wes Moore, author of *The Other Wes Moore*, and a fine human being that I’m sure many of us know personally, has spoken of a pivotal moment of clarity in his teenage years. He was away at military boarding school when he was 13, sent there by his mother to get his act cleaned up. He was close to being kicked out of the school when he called his mother to complain. Technically he wasn’t allowed to make any phone calls but Wes had already run away 5 times in the last four years. They were about to lose him. So they gave him 5 minutes to call whoever he wanted. So he called the only number he knew – his mom. He complained to his mom for a few minutes telling her that he was tired of this and was ready to come home. But his mother interrupted him. “Too many people have sacrificed for you,” she said. “and too many people are rooting for you. And you have to understand, it is not all about you.”¹

Jesus stands in the shadow of the cross and complains to the Creator. “My soul is troubled.” But the rest of the message is already on his tongue, “Father, glorify your name.” It’s not all about what I want. It’s what you want.

It’s a good message and it would be easier to digest if glorifying God’s name wasn’t all wrapped up in the cross. Glorify God’s name by doing justice? Yes. Glorify God’s name through song and thanksgiving? Absolutely. Glorify God’s name through your generosity or your service? By all means. But glorify God by submitting to the cross? John’s Gospel certainly thinks so.

It helps that, unlike some of the other places in scripture, John’s cross is not some form of substitutionary atonement, where Jesus takes on divine punishment that human beings deserve in order to free us of our guilt. And John’s cross is not about the forgiveness of individual sins. John’s cross judges “the world” and drives out “the ruler of this world.” “Now is the judgment of this world,” the text says, “now the ruler of this world will be driven out.”

Chuck Campbell points out that “the world” here is from the Greek word - “kosmos,” – and that word is not the same thing as God’s creation. This kosmos, this world is a fallen realm that exists “in estrangement from God. . .organized in opposition to God’s promises.” Campbell suggests that instead of translating kosmos as “the world,” it makes more sense to call it “the System.”²

On the cross, Campbell says, “Jesus publicly and dramatically judges the System by exposing it for what it is – not the divine regent of the world, but an

¹ I heard this story most recently from Wes Moore’s conversation with Kate Bowler, on her podcast, *Everything Happens*, Episode 6, “Wes Moore: Fork in the Road” March 6, 2018, <https://katebowler.com/everything-happens/>.

² Charles Campbell, “Homiletical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*, 5th Sunday in Lent, John 12:20-33, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 2008, pp. 141-145.

opponent of God's purposes; not the way of life, but the way of death. And by exposing the System in this way, Jesus 'casts out' its driving spirit" - the myth of redemptive violence.³

The crucifixion delegitimizes the power of the System built on violence, while simultaneously inviting us into Jesus' alternative system - what Jesus calls the Kingdom of God, aka the beloved community, aka the world that's not about you, not about me, but the one that's about God and all of us together.

I hope you agree that this theological wisdom is a big improvement on some of the terrible stuff developed by the church through the ages with the intent of privatizing the Christian faith - "me and Jesus" - and with the outcome of telling oppressed peoples to go on accepting their oppression - "everyone has their cross to bear!" It's a vast improvement over some of the theologies still alive and well in the church imploring victims of abuse to return to their abusers, or people to accept their stations in life because I have a cross and you have a cross. Yet still, there's a big part of me that wishes we could just rid our theology of any cross. Why must the ruler of the System be exposed through unjust suffering of Jesus? Why is sacrifice required in order to bring about the end of sacrificial systems? Why is it that unjust suffering is required in order to end unjust suffering?

Unfortunately, the Bible doesn't explain why this is true, only that it *is* true. The crucifixion is the turning point. It's somehow necessary to break the grip of the ruler of the System. It's needed to pull back the veil on the myth of violence and expose it for what it is. And while I wish this kind of injustice, this kind of suffering wasn't necessary, sometimes I think it's still the only way some of our eyes are opened. It took the suffering of teenagers in FL for a nation to hear the courageous voices of their peers saying, "we're done with the gun System and its myth that a way to stop a big gun is with a bigger gun." Your myth is killing us. And we have 17 of our classmates' bodies who expose that myth for what it is.

It took the black bodies of children in Alabama attacked by dogs and fire hoses for the nation to see the myth of segregation for what it is and for racism to lose some of its power. "Let them get their dogs," King shouted, "and let them get the hose, and we will leave them standing before their God and the world splattered with the blood and reeking with the stench of their Negro brothers."⁴

It took the bodies of women abused by powerful men in order for a nation to hear the clarity of their voices saying, we are done with this System. And we are bringing it down.

Now it's taking the bodies of people across our state dying from overdoses that can be stopped for some Republicans and Democrats to agree that our old way of treating addiction as a moral defect, punishable as a crime - that old System is full of lies that are killing us.

On the cross, Jesus exposes the System, judges it, and casts out its ruler. And the real question for us is whether we believe that is true. Whether we believe God has rid the System of its power. I'd say I believe it about 40% of the time. I want to

³ Ibid.

⁴ Quoted by Campbell from Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Word that Moved America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 157.

believe in Jesus' way of nonviolence but I love my Marvel Comic Universe where the good guys always use violence to win. I'm not a white supremacist but how did I end up living in a neighborhood that is mostly white? Where was my faith then? I've never harassed anyone, but science says that if you asked me to draw a picture of an effective leader, a majority of people like me are likely to draw a picture of a man. I want the people I love who struggle with addiction to get the support they need but more of my tax dollars and yours are going to build a wall while our city's Health Commissioner who has to ration naloxone, the life-saving anti-overdose drug. And the suffering continues, not because God is looking for more crucifixions but because we still give the System power it doesn't deserve.

Because I don't think God desires any more crucifixions. I think God is done with that System. God is done with the myth of that violence. As far as God is concerned, the System has been exposed and judged, its ruler cast out. The Crucified One's kin-dom aka the Beloved Community, aka the world that's not about you or me but about God and all of us together – that one is on the rise, accessible to us now, available to us in this moment.

God doesn't need any more crucifixions. No more unnecessary gun deaths, no more racism baked into the System, no more harassment in the workplace, no more people struggling with addiction without treatment on demand. God doesn't need any more crucifixions. God just needs us to believe in the world that's already come into being.

The one where we spend our time, our lives, our resources on healing for the people in our lives who need it the most, where we spend our energy on the things that bring us out of isolation and into community, out of fear and into love, out of the shadows and into the light. God just needs us to believe that world is available if not completely, then maybe just a little more this week than last.

Wes Moore didn't really understand what his mother had said to him the day she said it. She told him to stay in school because it wasn't about him, but by his account he went to bed angry that night. The full impact of his mother's words still needed time to settle in, but they did over time. "That was the first time anyone ever explained to me" he said, "that we really do live in a completely interconnected society. You are a piece of something big and beautiful and bright, if you so choose."⁵

His testimony is a good reminder that a Christian's role isn't to celebrate any crucifixions; it's to testify to the truth of God's alternative way of life in the midst of them. To hear the voices of teenagers saying, "we don't have to live like this. There is a better way." To hear the survivors of prejudice saying, "we don't have to be separate like this. There is a better way." To hear the voices of pain among us saying, "we don't have to hurt like this. There is a better way." To embrace God's path of life over a System always trying to scare us with the threat of death.

If that's the real significance of Jesus' crucifixion, more than 2000 years ago – that unjust suffering is not required, that sacrificial systems have been ended by God, that the myth of redemptive violence has been robbed of its power - wouldn't it be great if we could show God that we got it the first time?

⁵ Moore on *Everything Happens*.