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It is ironic, isn't it, that the faith we practice and adhere to is so deeply invested in promoting life that the center-point of it includes the violent, tragic death of its central figure? Jesus of Nazareth is, was and always will be the person on whom our faith centers. Jesus most fully reveals to us the nature of our God, and yet he is finally and ultimately glorified by dying.

The scriptures, old and new, contain some stories about death but most of the stories are about life and living. And Jesus' death was not one that his followers were expecting, even though he repeatedly conveyed to them that he knew that his death was imminent. Most of us would prefer to die at home in our own beds. But dying at home in bed was not to be Jesus' fate. Dying a humiliating, very public death was. Why did he have to die? And more specifically, why did he have to die this way?

Jesus was called to confront the powers of the world, the religious and political and military powers of the world that he lived in. He was intensely distressed over the tendency of men to misuse their power. He saw how that misuse of power negatively affected the people he lived with and among. He felt deep compassion for them in his gut. The Greek word that is translated to our English word compassion gets at that gut wrenching meaning by its very sound. The word is *splagchnizomai* (splach-nee-tzo-mai). If you say that word out loud you can feel the muscles in your gut move. The way people in power treated other people affected Jesus in a way that moved him to take action. That was the way that we know as the way of Jesus, the way of the cross.

But the curious thing about the actions that Jesus chose was that his actions did not mirror the actions of those he was opposing. That is to say, he didn't amass an army of soldiers to enforce a new way of living. He didn't enslave people to get his work accomplished. Where there was arrogance, he showed humility; where there was hatred, he showed love and kindness; where there was anger, he showed understanding.

The people in power did not understand how he could be successful at persuading people to follow him and his way. They were perplexed that his following grew larger and more

loyal by the day. They were afraid that he might actually overtake their place of authority. And they were afraid, too, of how his followers might respond if they took him out.

The powerful saw Jesus humility, compassion, honesty and generosity as a weakness to be exploited. They saw those characteristics as their way in. But they did not see that behind all those features of his character stood God; God in Jesus who was with them, who remains with us. By displaying those traits in his own person, Jesus was revealing to us the nature and characteristics of our God. The people who held religious power in Jesus' world, the Pharisees and the Saducees, saw God as external to themselves; as a force to be obeyed; as the judge behind all the law. Jesus showed the world that God was and is so much more than that. God loves us so much that, as it says in John, chapter 3, "he gave his only begotten Son."

God came to us in this person of Jesus so that we could know that he understands that it is hard to be human; that in taking on human form God was willing to show that He is with us in our suffering as well as our joys; our hopes as well as our sorrows. From beginning to end, He is with us. And in the end, it proved necessary that He die in his human-ness. He was willing to die in order to draw us into Himself taking our sinful natures with Him; absorbing them so that He could transform them. He would accomplish all of this on the third day when he would rise from death to demonstrate that God is more powerful than any human structure or system. God demonstrated that in Jesus, He showed that He is *for* us... always and forever. Knowing that, we can also know that when we are in God, when we invite God to dwell in us, no human structure or system can overtake us.

On this day we remember that Jesus died; was killed on a cross. He died a shameful death and because it was shameful and because it was terrifying, he died virtually alone. The disciples scattered. Except, John says, for his mother and the unnamed beloved disciple. Even as he was dying he reached out to them and called them together; called them into a new community uniting the old faith, through his mother, with the new faith, through his disciple. The two of them mourned Jesus' death, but they did it together. Later, when the disciples came

to themselves; when the shock of Jesus' death had begun to dissipate; they mourned the loss together. And together they would come to realize the importance of carrying Jesus' message to the world out *into* the world, out beyond the bounds of Judaism.

But that would be later. The time for grieving was at hand. When human beings grieve, we remember the person we knew, the things we did together, the love and the laughter, the happiness and the tears.

This year, sadly, we as a church family are far too practiced in grieving the loss of those whom we have loved dearly. We know too well the pain of loss and the bittersweet joy of remembering those who have died. While the light may have gone from Jesus' eyes as he hung on the cross that day, the light from his life here on earth lingered in the hearts and minds of those many, many souls he touched. Because we too know Jesus and the life he lived, let us leave this place today dwelling on the momentous work that he did and the generous way that he loved.

I close today with a poetic prayer attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux, a twelfth century monastic who wrote eloquently about his experience with and love for Jesus.

What language can I borrow  
To thank you, dearest friend,  
For this your dying sorrow,  
Your mercy without end?  
Bind me to you forever,  
Give courage from above;  
Let not my weakness sever  
Your bond of lasting love.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hawkins, J. Barney, IV and Markham, Ian S., *Words that Listen, A Literary Companion to the Lectionary, Volume 1*, Church Publishing 2018, page 233