

**Sermon for the Feast of Christ the King – Generosity Sunday
November 24, 2019 – Church of Reconciliation, San Antonio
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In the Name of Self-Emptying Love: We Respond with Extravagant Generosity

As most of you know, I grew up and into my faith in Jesus Christ in the Roman Catholic Church. Treasures of my childhood and teen years are kept in a small memory box (women of a certain vintage would know that this “treasure box” was actually called a “hope chest”... and I’ll go no further with that lest I lose the trajectory of this sermon to a rant)... Well, I keep this memory box in a drawer of my bedside table. In it are the scapulars I wore, the rosary beads I prayed, and the prayer cards or “holy cards” as they were called, mostly given to me by the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine who seeded in my heart a love of Jesus and a discerning spirit open to a “vocation” to serve the church. No, not this vocation, and not this church... but then, the Holy Spirit blows where she may! Thanks be to God!!!

Anyway, among the treasured rosary beads are the ones blessed by Pope John XXIII, the garnet ones my grandmother gave to me, and the funky white ones that glowed in the dark. Yes, you heard me correctly, the funky white ones that glowed in the dark. I had such a fascination with those beads. Each night I would stand with that rosary in my hand and subject it to the light of my lamp for five minutes. And then, as I was kissed good night and the light went out, I would gleefully pull the covers over my head and hang out, as it were with Jesus under the cover of night. I am certain that most nights I didn’t get beyond the first Our Father’s, Hail Mary’s and Glory Be’s ... but that’s not the point, is it? Every night, I loved the darkness lit by the light of Christ mysteriously found in those glow-in-the-dark beads. To this day, I cherish what that spiritual practice continues to teach me about finding light, the very Light of Christ, in the very midst of darkness, of one sort or another.

In her book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Barbara Brown Taylor asks, “How do we develop the courage to walk in the dark if we are never asked to practice?” ... Later in the book she quotes the fourteenth century author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*: “This darkness and cloud is always between you and God, no matter what you do. So set yourself to rest in this darkness as long as you can, always crying out to him whom you love. For if you are to experience God, or to see God at all, insofar as it is possible here, it must always be in this cloud and in this darkness.” Certainly these are sage words even as you and I are in the midst of darker, shorter days as we have felt brisk winds and falling temperatures signal a new season for which we should prepare, lest we find ourselves in the darkness and out in the cold. Just as the signs of the natural world signal a new season, so do the lessons of our liturgical year as we end one and find ourselves on the very threshold of another.

Last week's gospel described the stones of the temple falling one upon the other, impending darkness and destruction unleashed into the world. And today, the last Sunday of this liturgical year, the Feast of Christ the King, we find Jesus at the place of the Skull, Golgotha, a dump heap, outside of Jerusalem, hanging on the most heinous of all instruments of execution, a cross. As if the destruction of the Temple was not itself, enough to bear, we see Jesus hanging between two convicted criminals, with the jarring, jeering, and deriding name-calling of his day hanging over his head, King of the Jews.

Welcome, my friends, to Generosity Sunday at Church of Reconciliation!

And the more I prayed with the Gospel, the more convicted in heart I was by the absolute rightness of this Gospel story on this day, we have chosen as "Generosity Sunday." The power of this gospel story is truly the Good News of God in Jesus Christ. That in Jesus, the Divine has taken on the nature of our human condition in such a way as to be willing to sacrifice the last gasp of life, the last words of forgiveness, in the name of unconditional, self-emptying Love. Self-emptying Love, in which nothing of life is withheld as the pain and agony of this execution intended to accomplish what it thought was its worst. To murder Love. To end the reign of Love in a most greedy, evil, power-grabbing, life-destroying, intimidating persecution of Love itself.

Years and years ago, I supervised a seminarian, Pam, who preached about this story. She proclaimed:

What feels curiously hopeful to me is knowing that, in the years after Jesus' brutal execution, the Jesus movement grew. People knew what had happened to him – his crucifixion was not a secret. It was a scandal and it was proclaimed. And as the Roman government got more brutal, the Jesus movement became more important, not less; the Jesus movement got stronger, not weaker. Five hundred crucifixions a day, and the communities of Jesus' followers said to Other, we need to write these things down... We need to write down the teachings and the stories so that they will survive even if we do not. More people need to know the Jesus Way – to stand with and for people who are oppressed, with and for people who are hungry, thirsty, unsheltered, incarcerated, sick or disabled, disenfranchised and labeled "other" in what ever way destroys their dignity and self-worth. ... They reported that Jesus said, "Do not be afraid!" more than anything else, probably because then, like now, there was so much to be afraid of." (The Rev. Pamela Werntz)

So my friends, is this not the MOST appropriate and challenging story to have before us today as we, here and now, experience days of destruction, divisiveness, darkness, and death of all sorts?

What is our response to the ultimate, self-emptying Love of Jesus Christ hanging on a cross as he says, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do?” This is personal. How many times in my life have I been complicit in the evil done and the evil done on my behalf?

Standing at the foot of the cross, hearing Jesus crying out on behalf of his persecutors then and his persecutors now, what have I to offer on this Generosity Sunday?

One author I read this week, said this:

Gratitude and generosity coexist within us. We cannot nurture one without building up the other. Each quality shapes our mindset about and our posture toward being in this world. Resentment and selfishness grow in an environment of fear, unfreedom, and the perception that there is not enough – of anything- for everyone. Gratitude and generosity grown in an environment of faith and freedom. These virtues are honest responses to a world that brims over with God’s love for us. (Ignatian Solidarity Network, Vinita Wright)

Luke’s crucifixion narrative is a gospel that reminds us that injustice, violence, and even death NEVER have the last word in the KIN-DOM of God – which is the realm of Love. Love and “ONLY LOVE” have the last word. That’s how Jesus saves us – by showing us that the Divine One, who took on human flesh and bone, just like us, loved us to the end and back. In Jesus, we experience a Love that Loves no matter what. Just like those funky glow-in-the-dark rosary beads, Jesus is the Light in the midst of every darkness, the peace in the midst of upheaval, the Life that conquers all death.

Weeks ago, you received the little gem of a book, *Extravaqant Generosity*. You have been invited to “read, mark, and inwardly digest” its beautiful, simple and compelling illustrations and reflections. Today, in response to the Gospel, you are invited to reflect on “Practicing Extravaqant Love” – a Love that responds in extravaganat generosity to the self -emptying Love of God in Jesus Christ.

A Love that redeems... without counting the cost. A Love that heals... without judging worthiness. A Love that is willing to die and rise in the person of Jesus the Christ.

So, my seminarian, Pam, concluded her reflection with these words:

What strikes me about this scene most is that Jesus is challenged to save himself. And he does not. Perhaps he could not. What he does is to save the person next to him. If we are going to follow Jesus, that is what we must do too. We must remember that we are not called to save ourselves over and against everyone else. ... We are called to stand with the hurting, the vulnerable, the dispossessed, the hapless and the helpless. We are called to deliver one another to hope and blessing, to help lift one another's Heavy hearts, to welcome one another, as Jesus did, with no exceptions. To be the hands and heart of Love alone.

My friends, you and I are called to extravagant generosity... to living the Way of Jesus, the Way of Love each and every moment of our lives. We find ourselves in this season of transition... between ending and beginning, and ending and beginning again. And we are each in a unique relationship with Jesus in the particularities of our lives.

What I wish to celebrate and name in this moment, is how abundantly we are blessed... here, at Reconciliation by the Love of Jesus and Love we experience in each other's presence. And with me, I know you are extravagantly responsive to God's mission for us to be Healers, Reconcilers, Lovers in this desperate world. I trust each of you in that you have taken to your heart and to your prayer the question, "Lord, what where would you have me in my giving?"

Not only do I hope that you see, feel, hear, taste and see my gratitude... my deeper hope and prayer is that you see, feel, hear, taste and see the self-emptying Love of Jesus filling you with all grace and peace!

Blessings on this celebration of Extravagant Generosity today... and in all days to come!

Amen.