

*Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all. Amen.*

We all want to go out on our best day, right? – let that be the image that sticks. And what we celebrated out there, with the palms, before we processed in here and got to the uglier part of the story – looked like Jesus' best day. His disciples must have been thrilled –

"Finally, the crowds get it! Finally they see what we see!"

And in less than a week this strong, beautiful man set on a donkey for his victory lap, with children cheering and people shouting Hosannas, is being taken off a cross, lifeless, beaten, bruised, battered, betrayed, another victim of the violence at which the human race so excels.

And when our story turns again, to the truly unexpected triumph of Easter morning – for we do know this story, though the world does not; even when we get our surprise twist ending, it's not a restoration. It's a redemption. Jesus is not returned to his followers "good as new." He is returned as one who has been redeemed, who will redeem all of us. Those who kept and recorded and preserved the story for us made a great point of the fact that in Jesus' resurrection body, his wounds were very visible, though healed. The healing power of God is not about white-washing – no true restoration can come about without confronting the truth. That is the basis of the Truth Commissions that helped South Africans come to some reconciliation after the fall of apartheid. It is the basis on which the whole discipline called "Restorative Justice" is based.

Restorative Justice is an alternative to Punitive Justice – it looks for reconciliation based on restoring relationship, not on this party "paying" for their wrong.

Oh, reparations might become part of it, but it's not where you start.

Both parties start by both looking at the truth of what happened, hearing it, in all its bloody and painful detail, confronting the reality of the wounds.

And in that process, of dealing with reality,

true repentance and true forgiveness can come about.

Many victims just want to hear "I'm sorry" from those who perpetrate violence.

Forgiveness is possible, once the truth is acknowledged.

Costly, always costly, but possible.

And you don't get forgiveness without one party humbling herself to the other. The Christian story, perhaps unique among world religions, proclaims a Creator who humbled himself to his creation, in order to save them. That beautiful hymn from Philippians tells the story of Jesus' sacrifice – It began long before the cross. It began when he left the precinct of heaven and moved into our neighborhood – our rough, sometimes brutal neighborhood. He consented to take on the limits of human flesh, to be born among the poor and oppressed. He wasn't born in a palace, but a stable. Jesus chose humility at every stop on his journey – and here we see his self-offering at its highest, in his lowest. We see him subject himself in service to his disciples, washing their feet. And we see him subject himself to human evil, in his Passion.

Some Christians reject this story for its violence— why would God choose violence to end violence? As I ponder it, I see this: God did not choose the violence. People did that. People with God-given free will, that God did not take back even at the cost of saving his only Son. God let violence find its natural end. The violence is inevitable among human beings who want what they want and will take what they can get – and that's something that is in all of us. Violence is the consequence of human sin; it is the chosen weapon of evil.

The weapon that best counters violence is not more violence; it is love. It is humility. That is the self-giving love Jesus showed us, and lived for us. That is the lesson Jesus wants us to learn and live. The very best laboratory for doing this comes on Thursday night when we are invited into the deep humility of allowing another person to wash our feet, and the deep grace of washing those of someone else. The invitation is to recognize that Christ is washing our tired feet, and that we are washing his. It is an act of worship in which barriers are broken down. That changes the world!

The weapon that best counters violence is not more violence; it is love. It is forgiveness. The best laboratory for cultivating forgiveness is Good Friday. Understanding the gift that Jesus gave – for us – opens us to extend forgiveness around us. That changes the world. God did not choose it – but God gave himself over to its power, to turn it inside out. The only power greater than violence is the power to forgive.

And forgiveness is only real when the wounds are part of the picture.
We spend this Holy Week coming close to Jesus' wounds, not because we love
blood, but because we want to know the One who died to heal ours.

Gillian Welch wrote a song called, "By the marks."

*By the marks where the nails have been, by the sign upon his precious skin
I will know my savior when I come to him by the mark where the nails have been."*

So draw near to Jesus' wounds this week, the wounds by which we are healed.
And let him close to your wounds this week, so healing can flow through us.

Amen.