

Listening for Love

while

Avoiding the Violence

A poem cycle
by David R. Weiss

reflecting on the
seven words from the cross

July 2001

Preface

I grew up, like most Christians, being taught that Jesus died for my sins. And, like most Christians, I was happy to believe this. But at some point I began to have doubts. The notion that God required innocent blood to redeem humanity didn't work anymore. In fact, any interpretation I read that tried to explain *how* Jesus' death saved me or *why* it was necessary fell short. Far short.

Meanwhile, feminist and gay-lesbian critiques of atonement theology argued it was a profound mistake to suggest that Jesus' death was in any way redemptive. I came to agree that linking violence to salvation, by whatever theological theory, unwittingly reinforces the idea that, "in the right hands" (i.e., God's hands—or *the hands of those of who appoint themselves God's representatives*), violence is redemptive. History is littered with the bodies of those killed to "make things right": Jews, women, witches, blacks, Native Americans, LGBT people, and—today--countless Afghani and Iraqi civilians. We have seldom hesitated to think that one more round of violence will "do the trick."

As my understanding of Jesus' *life* deepened I saw things I never learned in Sunday School: particularly the *enormous challenge* he posed to the oppressing and dehumanizing powers of his day. I'm now convinced that Jesus died not because his death was needed to liberate me (or anyone) from sin, but because the powers that be in this world sought his death in order to preserve an unjust status quo. The cross—and the lyncher's rope, the assassin's bullet, the basher's baseball bat, and the jail cell—all represent the world's brutish attempts to keep power in hands other than God's, to make the world "work" on terms other than the compassion that Jesus preached and practiced.

Perhaps the most effective attempt to subvert compassion has been to lure us into *mis*-understanding the cross as God's will. Then we invest ourselves in honoring Jesus' death rather than in emulating his life. I now believe that atonement—the deep reconciliation we long for with God and with each other—is *not* accomplished by Jesus' death. *It hinges on the radical and daring hospitality present in his life*—and that's where our attention belongs, even, and especially, during Lent.

In this poem cycle, I step imaginatively into Jesus' own words on the cross to challenge the way we have understood its place in Jesus' life and in ours. May my words stir your souls as mine has been stirred.

~ David Weiss

**I. "Papa, forgive them,
for they do not see what they are
doing."**

These soldiers,
their brute bravado
tutored by tyranny
and terror,
themselves illiterate lackeys
to violence,
now pounding through
my flesh
the once warm wounds
inflicted on their own
long lost innocence;
their consciences gouged
into vacant sockets
unable to gauge
this mallet
mauling my love
even for them.

And these misguided guides
to my own kin
building babeled towers
of Torah and Temple
scaling skyward
impervious to the Presence
of Compassion
ever incarnating Itself
earthward
only most recently
in my mere mortal flesh;
now hurling holy harm
against the gathering Grace
of God;
no wisdom
in their wizened eyes,
ducts dry for drought of
flowing justice,
sight long since scarred instead
by cataracts of sacrifice;
they do not see that
they have treed
the very Touch of Love.

And these jeering Jewish
peasant kin,
their devotion to mercy
unmade by heavy burdens
they were never
meant to bear;
their golden-jeweled curiosity
concerning this Kin-dom
of Compassion
now quenched
by furied flames of fear,
melted down into
mocking words
that laugh
as Liberating Love
is maimed
atop this mountain.

And dare I draw
breath deep enough
to will these words
toward distant days
when endless eyes
will fasten on my
fractured frame
beholding there the
bloodied Love of God,
and yet bewitched
by Eden's serpent song
they see instead
a god
made like unto themselves
and in their darkened hearts
they dress divine
the lust for blood
that marks creation's
break from Grace.

II. "Woman, behold your son." . . .
"Behold your mother."

Ah, mother,
was it for this ill end
you nursed me well,
cuddled, cooed, doted?
Can all those
childhood smiles
I gave you
ever offset this
sword of ache
that pierces your side now
before any spear
has found my own?
Remember,
in your harrowed heart
the song you sang
while in your womb
I slept and grew.
This piercing pole
deals no divine decree
to me
but rather marks
the payment claimed
from me
by earth's oppressing powers
for having lived your song
so well,
but to this last
I'll hum its tuneful truth.

Now, mother,
weep your tears
and wail your tender wails,
but do not let
your joyful song
die silent on this tree;
sing now to John
of heaven's heart
for justice whole and holy;
embrace my friend,
for love of me,
and raise me
in your love.
And John, dear friend,
beloved best
among my best,
to you comes now
the task to live
the words
that pulse your poet's soul,
'As I have loved,
so shall you love.'
Now take this woman
to your heart
and love her
in my stead.
John, be the echo
of my life,
a living memory to my mom,
a gracious good
to heal her hurting
hungry heart
and move her music
once again
to magnify the Lord.

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**III. “Truly, I tell you this:
today you will rest with me in Paradise.”**

Ha!
By what blood-flecked
fly-bitten, pain-filled
prerogative
do I speak such
splendid promise?
Facing full the folly
of my thorn-crowned
regal wreck
I reckon yet
your redemption, friend—
not by any blackening blood
bleeding my life,
some sun-burnt sacrifice
for sin.
Your hope, all hope,
hangs whole on heaven’s
healing heart,
on mercy moved
by mighty love—
not by lust for blood.
‘Paradise, today,’ my friend,
is but the echo
of my life,
itself an echo
from on High;
my royal role
from first to last
has been to promise
Paradise,
not as the purchase
of my death
but in my life
delivered plain,
it’s gathering goal
the gift of God’s good grace,
a treaty tendered
eternally ... ‘today.’

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IV. "I thirst."

This parched prayer
met by meager mercy,
a sour gift
upon a sour day.
But as the psalmist sang
so I thirst, too,
less for sour wine
to mask my mortal wounds
than for the
flowing flood of justice
Amos' anguish augured
long ago.

Only yesterday,
as thirsty as today,
I raised a cup
in covenantal toast
to Jeremiah's words of hope,
declaring in our plaintive past
the promise of
a love for God
sealed not by efforts of
oneself
but sealed by God's own
luring love
writ well upon our hearts.

Today that wine
pours out my pores,
while poor wine
licks my lips.
Will those who heard
my words last night
mark my meaning well?
My blood runs red—
I bleed today—
not to bribe God's justice
but just to make
that luring love
most clear
to those most dear.
I said
no wine
would cross my lips
until the Kingdom
came.
See, as I sip
this vinegar,
I say
the Kingdom's come!
If love
within a human frame
can hold out
to this end,
then Love
has surely
in this thirsty moment
wrought the world
anew.

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V. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
(Psalm 22:1)

Crossbeams abide no breath
to say the psalm complete,
so deep despair
in unseen irony
must herald here the hope
that haunts my heart
even now.

Forsaken?
Yes—
to all whose sight settles simply
on this tomb-toward
timbered trunk of mine.

Forsaken?
Ask the leper or the lame;
ask the mute, the deaf, the blind,
the dying or the demon-driven folk
now whole.
Collect the counsel of these outcast
cast in at the last;
they know this psalm
from bittered start
to Destined end.
In their own flesh
as in my own,
the tale of Love's triumphant
liberation at the last
cannot be kept long
silent.

Short days past
amid palmed pandemonium
some pleaded that I
play the people placid
in their praise . . .
Well today they're placid, true enough,
hosannas halted at this hill,
and my own breath
fast faltering
to press my Maker's praise.

And yet, forsaken?
No!
The psalm begun upon my lips,
will have its hearing yet,
and herald heaven's hallowed hope—
at dawning daybreak, rolled away,
a stone,
will cry out, raising praise
a last hosanna hurled high
from earth to sky
unsealing every lip
including mine.

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VI. "Papa, into your hands I commit my spirit."

Against this hovering
howling dark,
you—only you—
a hand-made home,
my life's leaven.

Already in adolescence
early inklings
of holy hunger
wove winsome words
heavenward,
haltingly, hurriedly,
your hands a home
even then.

Ragged and reeling,
John's Jordan still dripping
while spirit-driven
into desert dryness,
I rebuffed
every offer of my Adversary,
racing in prayer
to the oasis of your palms.

Hemmed in
by hectic hours,
dawn to dusk
healing hurts and hopes,
heralding heaven's
homecoming
and spilling my spirit
in prodigal peril,
but nightly
in lonely love
lingering prayerful
in the fingers
of your peace.

My face,
in fool's final folly,
fastened with zeal
on Zion,
no city more—or less—
holy than she.

Committing my
climatic courtyard cleansing
did I not then
(at least as much as now)
unequivocally

against all earthly anger,
commit my spirit
into the God-awful
Gracious
grasp of your hands?
Prophetic fury protesting
misplaced piety
presuming to placate
you
with altared offerings
as though Love
is altered by anything
other than love,
as though mercy
might be made
more merciful
when run red with blood.
Papa! I measured my life,
my breathing and brooding,
my warnings and welcomings,
by your mercy,
and however much
human hands (and hearts)
blend blessing
and bleeding
never (!) in your
hand-made home
in all my leavened life
was Grace
less than grace.

Now, Jerusalem's gala entry
given over to
Gethsemane's garden anguish
given over to
Golgotha's jeer-jarred agony;
now, with awful end
at hand
death's deliverance, gloved,
a glib, glaring, gauntlet
demanding damning despair
of me,
my death-defiant prayer
finds final hope
and home
in hands which held me
whole
all along.

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VII. "It is finished."

This baleful boast
is bought, but just barely,
by battled breathless
breath;
these words willed forth
air-etched
in painful counterpoint
to Pilate's placard,
Rome's regal-razing levity
leering
in mocking menace
above my thorn-crowned brow.

It *is* finished.
All deeds
from birth to death
drawn whole
and the whole Deed
deemed done.
All ends
fused full
and as one End
now final and fulfilled.
Each prayerful piece
now pieced as one,
and that one Prayer
now prayed
to perfect peace.

But *what* is done,
what end filled full,
what perfect peace is prayed?
Alas, my Lord,
I must lament
and loud and long, I fear
that in these
liquid lungs of mine
wet waves wash words away
while outward
my own spike-speared
flog-flayed flesh
and beam-broken body
beckon, as bloody bait,
to hearts haunted and hell-bent
by unholy hints
imagined here—
Heaven's handshake heralding
God's ungodly agreement
to honor my innocence,

my timbered torture
as legal tender
delivered down deathward
in divine duty,
reckoned ransom
against some ghastly goal
of justice just
made merciful by mismeasuring
the merit
of my life
as though defined whole
by my death,
reversing truth eternal
for the Tempter's twisted lie
and inverting
incarnation
into
infanticide.

What's finished here
is one last festive feast
my broken body breaking
as my bread-breaking broke
every boundary
marking off as marginal
those most meant
to know
God's love.
The deed that's done
while nails catch bone
to wooden beam
and I am raised, arms outstretched,
to float upon
a sea of pain
is that this net
of Love
cast out from earth's unwanting
shore
finds one last catch,
and even in my
going out
I yet am
gathering in.

The end that orders
all my life
embraced entire
on this tree
is to embody
in myself
the bounty
of God's love.

The prayer prayed
now to perfect peace
while poised prone-pierced
upon this poisoned pole
is simply said,
that this life
to the last
be nothing more
and nothing less
than
Love.

David R. Weiss
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“Pieta” means “pity” and often names the artistic image (painted or sculpted) of Mary cradling her dead son at the foot of the cross. This poem/song invites us to rethink how we understand the cross by imagining Mary, in this moment of “pity,” recalling her own Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) and seeing Jesus’ life as a lived refrain to that song. In the last verse Mary sings—for us.

Pieta

Mary, when you held your son, bloodied for the work he’d done;
lifeless body bound for sod, did you blame his death on God?
When you searched your grieving heart, memories pondered from the start,
Did you find the words there stored, when you magnified the Lord?

God, you dwell on high in cloud; come to earth—put down the proud.
Cast the mighty ones aside; with the lowly poor abide.
Make my womb’s own fruit a feast, for the hungry and the least.

Mary, holding your own kin, did you think he’d died for sin?
Was it God who’d bid him die? A Holy Thirst for blood on high?
In that chorus from your youth, could you hear a deeper truth?
In his living could you see, what had nailed him to the tree?

Mary, had he lived your song, preached a God whose Grace is strong,
mercy reaching far and wide; was it for such tales he died?
Healing blind and deaf and lame, brought your son imperiled fame,
gathering the outcast in, feasting with them as with kin.

God, you dwell on high in cloud; come to earth—put down the proud.
Cast the mighty ones aside; with the lowly poor abide.
Make my womb’s own fruit a feast, for the hungry and the least.

Mary, in your pity full, did a vision fill your soul?
Not the cross was God’s desire, but that life of holy fire.
Crossing boundaries etched in stone, Rome and Jew sought flesh and bone.
As he brought to life God’s breath, those in power sought his death.

Mary, as they brought him down, and you kissed the thorny crown,
wherein lay the hope you felt, ’gainst the blow that you’d been dealt?
Midst your grief was there a joy, at the beauty of your boy,
bloody now upon your breast, head at last a place to rest?

God, you dwell on high in cloud; come to earth—put down the proud.
Cast the mighty ones aside; with the lowly poor abide.
Make my womb’s own fruit a feast, for the hungry and the least.

Mary, sing your song once more, for the hurting and the poor,
for the outcasts not yet in, those today not seen as kin.
God’s desire was never death, but for life aflame with Breath;
this time when you sing your plea, Mary, sing your song—for me.

God, you dwell on high in cloud; come to earth—put down the proud.
Cast the mighty ones aside; with the lowly poor abide.
Make my womb’s own fruit a feast, for the hungry and the least.