



---

## The Crucified God

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given November 20, 2016*

*Christ the King Sunday: Luke 23:33-43*

In 1944 there was a German teenage boy named Jürgen Moltmann who was drafted into the German army. He himself was not a member of the Nazi party but was a loyal German citizen who fought for his country. A year later he was captured by the British and spent the next three years in various prisoner of war camps in Belgium, Scotland and England. While he was in the Prisoner of War camps, his British captors would often nail pictures of Buchenwald and Auschwitz and the other concentration camps on the walls where the German soldiers could see the horrors they had committed. Jürgen Moltmann said that he often felt it would have been much better to die than to have to face the monstrosity of what he and his country had done. Many of his fellow German soldier inmates committed suicide in the POW camps.

While he was in England, there were some British Christians who somehow got permission to come and take the German POWs out to lunch. This was astonishing because, beyond what Germans had done to Jews which was enough to make anyone despise them, much of England had been bombed to unrecognition by their German enemies. And yet these British Christians took their enemy's soldiers to lunch every week. Gradually, over the course of his long imprisonment, Jürgen Moltmann became a Christian. He later said that he did not find Christ, but that Christ found him in the guise of an enemy who showed him compassion and dignity over time.

Moltmann went on to become one of the twentieth century's most influential theologians – so much so that his writings became the basis for what is now called liberation theology. Liberation theology insists that God suffers in solidarity with those who are bullied and oppressed, and that God offers reconciliation and atonement to their oppressors – so much so that there truly is hope in this world. I cannot overstate how much influence Moltmann has had in the world stage – people in Latin America and Asia and Africa and Europe and North America have all found in his writings an encounter with the living God, which has given the hope and power to overcome colonialism, and injustice, and oppression of many kinds.

Moltmann's conversion, and the theology that flowed from it, came about because his enemies loved him and forgave him even though he manifestly did not deserve it. This love and forgiveness did not come about because they were good people. It came about because they had experienced the God who reveals Godself through the person of Jesus – the person who shows us most fully who God is.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. It is the very last week of the liturgical year before the Christian new year begins again next week in advent. And the text for Christ the King Sunday is always a text from the Passion. It is always a text that reveals Jesus, not in the moments of his greatest worldly success, but when he is being tried and convicted and killed as a criminal. The betrayal, and death, and resurrection of Jesus is the central cipher of Christian faith. It is powerful because in it we see a third way beyond violence and hatred and revenge.

The other night in vestry meeting we were talking about the “brand” of St. Stephens Church. What brand would most communicate our message and our identity in the world? This may not been what they or any of us have ever been looking for, but the brand of Christian faith has always been the Crucified God. This God loves and forgives what is impossible to forgive. This God defeats violence and death itself through relentless solidarity with the oppressed and suffering, and this God also offers reconciliation to oppressors. In a time when our national attention is focused very much on the winning and losing leaders on the national stage, we need this reminder that our ultimate allegiance is to the only one we call Lord: Jesus, the Crucified God.

This past weekend St. Stephens, as you have heard, we hosted Teens Encounter Christ, or TEC. Now this was my first TEC. When I first heard people talking about TEC I could tell it was a thing. People who talk about TEC get this smoldering look in their eyes and they start talking with fire in the belly and you can tell it is a big deal, but I didn’t know why. Well, I will tell you. At TEC this weekend more than 150 teenagers gathered to do a deep dive into what we call the Paschal mystery, the Easter mystery – the betrayal, trial, death, and resurrection of Jesus, which again is the brand of Christian faith. These teens were silly and goofy and so fun. They just oozed all over the place and yelled and laughed and danced. But through working with the death and resurrection of Jesus, they also had the chance to tell their own deep stories of loss, and shame, and abuse, and attempted suicide, and sickness. It was incredibly powerful.

It was powerful because they encountered the simple message of Jesus, the Crucified God. This is a message of radical, unconditional, boundless love. It continues to surprise us because that kind of love is so difficult to imagine or accept. And it surprises us because it shows up, often, from the margins - from underneath, so to speak. It comes to us in the rejected places of the world, from the young, or the old, or the forgotten. Without realizing it, we keep expecting God to show up through the systems of power that exist. We think God will help the poor and the forgotten through whichever presidential candidate you happened to vote for. We keep wanting God to take control of the world stage and impose justice from the top. But Jesus teaches us that our God does not operate that way. God can be found in solidarity with and healing for those who are suffering, and in radical forgiveness and transformation of those who are guilty. Our God loves all people, including the guilty and those who commit violence, without exception.

As one of my heroes, an Episcopal deacon from San Francisco named Sara Miles puts it, if you want to meet God, sometimes you have to sit in the smoking section. If you want to meet God sometimes you have to hang out with 150 sweaty teenagers. God is with that relative of yours who

really ought to take their meds more consistently, and with your neighbor who talks too long when you're in your driveway trying desperately to get into your car because you're late to work. God is with the older people who live alone. God is with you and with me when we are at your worst. And God offers us love, and healing, and forgiveness, and transformation of life. This is the meaning of Christ the King Sunday.

But does this unconditional love that God offers us in Christ mean we just sweep away the injustice in the world? Does it call for a kind of naïve optimism? Please hear me on this. Does this mean if you are being abused you just need to forgive your abuser and be done with it? Does it mean we should do nothing about the violence and injustice that is in the world because God forgives it all anyway? No. If you are being abused, please come talk to me or Father Tom or any of the good people around you and get some help. Forgiveness may be part of the journey, but it is not the first step. When you see injustice and oppression in the world, please ask yourself what would be a faithful way to intervene. The Scriptures reveal a God who is relentlessly concerned for those who are suffering--the widow and the orphan and the alien and the slave and the barren woman and the prostitute and misfits of all kinds. But Jesus shows us how to resist abuse and violence without becoming violent abusers ourselves. In the current political climate, this is more important than ever.

The unconditional love of God is big enough to contain all of us. The unconditional love of God is the container in which we live, the very air we breathe. As we take Communion together in a few minutes, I invite you to realize even more deeply that this is our encounter with the Crucified God, with the love of God that is beyond conditions.