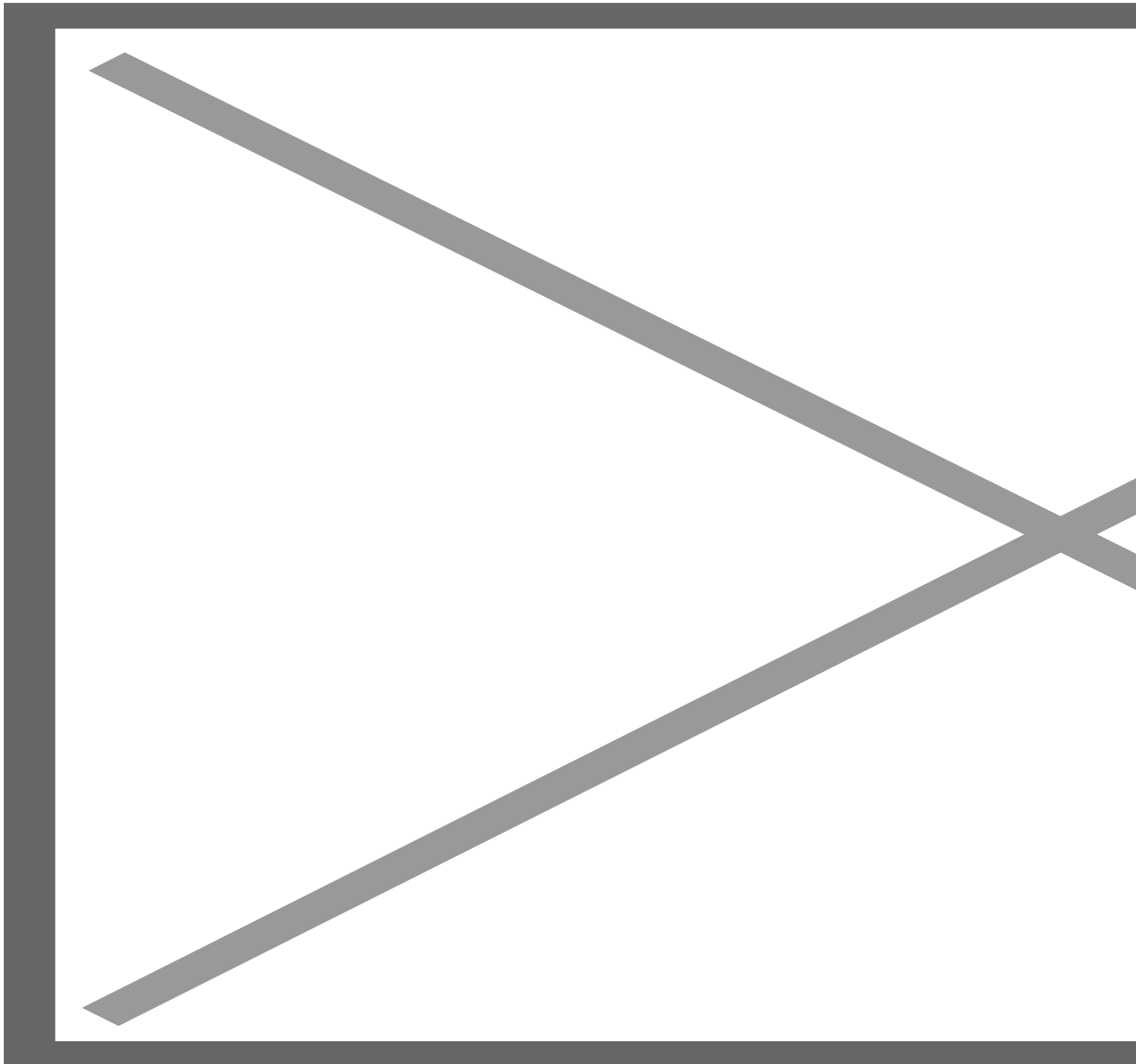


What does the death of Jesus have to do with me?

Whatever the historical reasons for the crucifixion, the Christian tradition has always insisted that one of the reasons Jesus died is *me*.

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Century illustration (Source image: Christ on the Cross, by Girolamo Muziano / Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art)

Why did Jesus die? This is the central question of our faith. Unless we can answer it in a way that connects the cross with us and our world, then the gospel falls apart. Either Jesus' death has something to do with us or it doesn't.

I spend a lot of time reflecting on this question with my freshman theology students. In the early part of the semester, they offer the answers that they grew up with: Jesus died because God wanted him to. Jesus died so our sins can be forgiven. Jesus died so we can go to heaven. But one by one, we unpack these answers and question the theological sleights-of-hand they perform. Why couldn't God choose to forgive us without having someone killed? Why couldn't God choose to let us into heaven without having someone killed? Why did God decide to provide our salvation by having someone killed? You see the pattern.

On a historical level, Jesus was killed by Rome because there was something threatening about his growing movement. Of course, this doesn't mean Jesus himself was threatening; he was famously nonviolent, and you can bet that Roman authorities knew that much about him. But to wind up on a Roman cross, there had to be something about his reputation that made the folks in power think he may have had kingly ambitions. (Why else crucify him as "King of the Jews"?) Riding into Jerusalem on a colt, in a possible send-up of Caesar's own triumphal entry, would certainly have done the trick. Perhaps that's why the synoptic gospels place the triumphal entry at the beginning of the events of Passion Week: to show how Jesus' fatal entry into Jerusalem leads to his arrest later that week.

I was reflecting on this chain of events at church last Sunday while we read Matthew's Passion story aloud. "Let his blood be on us and our children," I said along with my fellow parishioners, allowing the weight of the gospel reading to settle uncomfortably on me. Whatever the historical reasons for the cross, the Christian tradition has always insisted that one of the reasons is *me*. But here we move beyond the realm of history into another realm of reflection, one that is provoked yet not determined, instigated yet not delineated by the historical events narrated in the gospel memories. What role do we play in the Passion of Jesus? Surely we're involved, which is why even today we wave palm branches. How can we connect the theological claim of our caught-up-ness in the crucifixion with the historical hypothesis that Rome had strategic reasons to throw Jesus on a cross?

Maybe, though, we're emphasizing the wrong parts of the story or asking the question in the wrong way. Here I turn to reflections Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt offers in *The Love That Is God*. In this short book, the Catholic theologian asks why "the love that is God take[s] the form of the cross when it shows itself to us?" Constructing a good answer to this question requires us to move away from those theologies that interpret the crucifixion as God's punishment for human sin. God, as Paul reminds us, was *in Christ* reconciling the world to himself, a claim that gives the lie to atonement theologies that separate God, the offended party, from Jesus, the one working alone to appease him.

God did not want the crucifixion to happen. What God wanted, says Bauerschmidt, was for *Jesus* to happen—and to happen in a specific way, one that, from this side of history, ran smack into a Roman cross. Here's how he puts it: "Rather than ask why God wants Jesus to *die* the way he did, we should ask why God wants Jesus to *live* the way he did and why this way of life led us to want to *kill* him."

Jesus was truly the man for others. He took his being *from others*, from the world as it happened to him. For the sick, he was a healer; for the outcast, he was a friend; for the accused, he was an advocate. He was completely opened, turned out to the God who so loves the world and to the world God so loves. But it just so happens that many people in God's world are suffering, and it is first and foremost to these people—the marginalized, the despised, the poor, the misunderstood, the forgotten, the easy-to-throw-away—that Jesus comes to bring God's saving, liberating, embracing, joy-giving presence.

The movement of God in Jesus toward those in need of help is truly good news to many—though possibly not to those who do not need or want any help, those sustained by their own wealth, their own power, their own greatness. In fact, not only do they not want to hear the good news for the poor; they don't want the poor to hear it either. But Jesus insists on sharing his father's bounty, and the powers-that-be take notice. And then they take steps to quiet the good news, steps that ultimately require them to take life.

God knew these risks, and presumably Jesus did, too. He could read the writing on the wall. He knew the authorities weren't thrilled with all his talk of his father's kingdom, a kingdom opposed to the greatness and splendor and violence of Rome. He figured someone would get annoyed when he playfully rode a colt into Jerusalem, hailed by shouts of "Hosanna!" But he did it—because he was obsessed with the future that God insisted on bringing about, a future that promised to make good on, to vindicate, to celebrate, to privilege all of history's forgotten. And that's just not good news for the empires who wish to forget them.

No matter. This is the way that God wanted Jesus to live, so it's how Jesus lived. For others. For the others who had no others to stand for and by and with them. Even for those others who naively believed they needed no other but themselves. It is this for-ness that constitutes both Jesus' life and Jesus' death. And it is this for-ness that pleases God, an embodied for-ness that, in its final exhalation, gives off a sweet aroma of love to the God who helplessly looks on, grieved by the world's murderous obsession with its own greatness.

So what does Jesus' death have to do with me? Jesus died because he lived the life God wanted him to live, a life that I am incapable of living. For all of my talk of God's kingdom, I'm still taken in by Rome, still taken in by wealth, by fame, by reputation. Greatness intrigues me. I want to network with it, to be thought of by its scales, to succeed on its terms. Thankfully, in my worst moments, when the temptation to want greatness threatens to devour my peace, the Spirit of the crucified God comes to me quietly and reminds me that God's future has no time for such passing-away trivialities. But it's only by grace that I am able to turn from the lure of power to the weakness of the cross. What comes to me fleetingly by grace came to Jesus naturally.

Which is why Rome killed him. Rome was great, and it had no time for someone who preached a kingdom where the greatest were not in power. Greatness killed Jesus.