**Act III: Surrender**

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It gets a bad wrap, surrender, because we tend to equate it with losing. The word surrender means literally to give over (sur = over, render = give) to surrender is to give something over; to lose something. Willingly. If you waive the white flag in surrender, you admit defeat. If you lose a lawsuit, courts order you to surrender your assets. A checkmated king is literally surrendered, knocked flat over in a final act of disgrace. We ascribe little nobility to surrender, the way we do say, to sacrifice. Surrender seems a bad way to lose.

At the heart of surrender is a willingness to give up control over one’s future, and more specifically to hand it over to someone else. This can go well: surrendering to the powerful can elicit mercy and the preservation of life. Surrender can even be the first step on the journey towards healing. But it can go badly: surrendering to the powerful can be an invitation to one’s own further victimization. But you don’t know it will turn out. So it’s risky business. Sometimes what makes it hard to surrender, even in moments when it is so clearly the best course of action, is our fear about which of these outcomes it will be for us. When we expose our truth and stand at the mercy of others’ responses, will we be treated with warm embrace or invite our own destruction?

Some think of surrender as a kind of self-abdication, a cop-out or an unwillingness to take responsibility for one’s own life and one’s own problems. I guess I can imagine how that might be true. But that’s not really how I think of it. Surrender is a conscious choice to acknowledge the truth of the present moment and let someone else be in control of what will happen next. And you’re your work is done. What happens next reveals more about the nature of the one to whom you have surrendered than it does about you, for good or for ill.

And for Jesus, it was both. For Jesus in his Passion, we are reminded that while surrender may be a bad way to lose, it is also a good way to win. Because Jesus’ surrender to the Cross was both of these. Something precious was lost in a terrible way. And something was gained, too.

In Luke’s version of the Passion, Jesus cries out finally, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” At his last breaths, he surrenders the future of his spirit to God’s loving care, and the future of his body to humanity’s violent corruptions. Now this may not feel like much of a conscious choice at first -- by the time he says this, he’s nearly dead anyway. But the Gospels go out of their way to remind us that while he doesn’t seek out his own suffering, he at least chooses to endure it. The soldiers, tormenting him in his anguish, taunt him to come down from the cross and save himself, implying that he can’t. They imply that his suffering at their hands is not an act of chosen surrender, but rather of their ultimate power over him. And the irony of the story is, of course, that we know they’re wrong. Jesus could come down from his cross, but instead he freely chooses to surrender to it.

Why?

The dark bromides from catechisms of yore about God needing Jesus to die as a sacrifice for our sins or to satisfy a debt to God’s honor are little comfort and no help. In fact, I find them harmful. These explanations, rooted in a medieval need to protect God’s omnipotence, turn Jesus into a punching bag and God into some kind of sadistic abuser. This cannot be the kind of God in whose image we were created. We were not made to live in a spiritual economy that demands the suffering of innocents for the sake of the guilty. Worse still, this theology suggests that God’s entire work of freeing humanity was accomplished from the Cross. If Jesus’ willingness to die is what forgives our sins and pays our debts, then why doesn’t the Gospel end on Good Friday? Why isn’t surrender the final act in the drama? What work would be left for Easter?

A better approach, I think, begins with thinking about Jesus’ surrender to the Cross not as the culmination of his mission to bring God’s gift of freedom to us, but as a consequence of it. Jesus didn’t spend his life on a mission of death, he spent it on a mission of life. With every moment of his public ministry he witnessed to the in-breaking of God’s reality of peace and justice, compassion and reconciliation, self-giving generosity and solidarity with the poor. Throughout his life, Jesus surrendered the idea of managing his own future, to the daily living out of his mission. Living one day at a time, one encounter at a time. He was fully present to the love of God that he was incarnating in each moment. Jesus didn’t have plans for his life, he had a purpose for his life. And he trusted that purpose, because it was God’s purpose. His whole life was an ongoing surrender of his future to God’s purposes. Again and again through the years, his ministry of love drew more and more resistance from the powers of his day, but he continued to surrender his own plans for his life to God’s purpose for him in the world. Like many others who live so fully in this way, Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, Oscar Romero, it isn’t surprising that the consequence of this commitment was the Cross.

God didn’t need the Cross for Jesus’ redeeming work to be complete. But because the Cross happened as a result of Jesus’ mission, his final work was to surrender to the future it offered. To those who watched him carry his cross through the streets, and who stood by weeping, that future must have seemed destined to be only suffering. Jesus’ surrender to it must have seemed to ludicrous. I still find myself occasionally wanting Jesus to use his power to save himself -- like a child who imagines that the seventeenth time they read the ending of the story it just might be different. The noble hero might win. But, of course, he did win. He won by doing what he had always done: by surrendering to God’s purposes for him, even in his suffering. There was still another chapter left to write in Jesus’ story, and Jesus trusted God to write it for him.

“Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit.”

Do *we* trust God to write the next chapter of *our* stories? Do you? Are we entirely willing to live our lives in the present and surrender our future to whatever God has in store for us? Or are we determined, like Pilate, like the Temple authorities, like even the disciples, to be the authors of our own destinies? Sometimes we confuse the task of crafting our own future which belongs to God, with the task of living each moment as a beloved child of God, which is the heart of our discipleship. At least I do, convinced that I can plan out a life for myself that is both holy and avoids as much suffering as possible. But that’s not quite enough.

God does not call us to actively seek out suffering. But we are not to be afraid of it either. God calls us to live the life of faith moment to moment, and surrender our futures to God’s purposes. By day we do the work of discipleship: we tell the truth, we bind up wounds, we weep with the sorrowful, we are agents of healing, we confront injustice, we are generous with forgiveness, we feed the hungry, we stand up for the persecuted. And when night comes, we don’t count the cost. Instead, we pray Jesus’ words: “Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.” And then, we do it again. And again and again. Until, like Jesus, we breath our last. For this surrender is the path to true freedom. Not freedom from pain or loss or sorrow. But freedom to live closer and closer to the heart of God each day, come what may. Amen.