Love That Will Not Let Us Go—Jn 11:1-45

About a hundred years ago, on a day that might have been much like today, a young family was gathered: father, mother, and three boys, about five, three, and two. They were gathered outside, on the grass. They were gathered to bury a baby girl. The cemetery was fairly new, on the young edge of the city. Today, it’s well within the city limits. The fir and holly trees, now old and well-established, were then saplings. What are now row after row of gravestones, then, were a handful, here and there. Marian was buried in an unmarked grave; her parents were poor immigrants who couldn’t afford a gravestone, even one of the smallest, one of those topped by a little lamb, like the ones you can see there today, worn by time.

It was my grandfather who told me about his baby sister; he was five at the time, and while he remembered the general area where she was buried, he didn’t know the exact grave. I’m not just sure how my great-grandmother got through that day, that day that, for all I know, might have been just like today. She didn’t know, then, that though she would have three more sons, she would never have another daughter. No, I’m not sure how my great-grandmother got through that day, or the long, heavy days afterwards.

I have to conclude that her faith got her through, for she was a woman of deep and strong faith. She passed this along to her son, my grandfather, who passed it along to his daughter, my mother, who, I suppose, may well have passed it along to me. God willing, I will pass that faith along to my children. Despite much evidence to the contrary—oh, yes, much evidence to the contrary in her life, my great-grandmother had abundant faith that there was a loving, kind, and grace-giving God.

In this life, that faith is not always easy to hold on to, is it? In this life, holding onto that faith demands a lot of growing, a lot of patience, a lot of hoping, a lot of sorrowing, a lot of praying—sometimes a lot of tears shed when no else is around to see—except for God, who always sees.

The Swiss pastor and theologian Karl Barth once famously advised us to have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other—although today I guess he’d have to say the Bible in one hand and a tablet in the other. I read the news mostly through the internet. I read the newspaper only once a week, on Sunday afternoon. I don’t read all the paper, but I do skim most of it, including, for some reason, the obituaries. I need to stop doing that. My father reads the obituaries in case there’s someone he knows who has died: classmates, co-workers. I don’t quite know why I skim over them.

Last Sunday was not the easiest day for me. I had a somewhat long, somewhat dry sermon to preach that morning, and an even longer, difficult sermon to preach that evening. I wanted to relax with the paper, read *The Lockhorns* and get a laugh, maybe get tangled up in the crossword,

but first I skimmed the obituaries, and God just about tore my heart out. I saw a young face, a picture taken earlier this year: a smiling, happy boy. Leo, eleven months old, who “passed away unexpectedly on Thursday, March 27, 2014, at OSF Saint Francis Medical Center in Peoria.” His parents’ only child. The obituary tells us “Leo loved his brush, his orange bear, and his blankies, but most of all he loved spending time with mommy and daddy.”[[1]](#footnote-1) It doesn’t tell us the cause of his death: I have the feeling that it was something sudden, unexpected.

The obituary does not tell us what it was like for his parents, what it was like finally to have to go home that day, go home without their little boy. The obituary does say this: “Leo lived the perfect life.” The perfect life. The perfect life. How can it say that? How can we believe that? It can say that, beloved, because Leo’s parents believe there is a loving, kind, and grace-giving God. We can believe that because we know Jesus Christ, because we believe, with Leo’s crushed and faith-full parents, that there is a loving, kind, grace-giving God. Leo, whose name means, lion, was here too, too briefly, yet he lived the perfect life, and oh, we know, yes, we know, how very much he was—is—loved.

It was hard for me to read about Leo. Little did I know that my torn heart, just starting to mend, would be utterly broken the next day, when I read this:

“Callum Wilson was regularly beaten until he died aged 11 months old after a final savage attack by his mother, Emma.” So reads the article in the UK *Mirror*. It goes on to say, “The 25-year-old even took a selfie during one episode of abuse with her beaten son [screaming] in the background.” Officials took Emma’s word for it that her two-year-old child was to blame for the scratches and bruises on Callum. They believed her each time, even seven times in the weeks before Callum’s death.

His mother had concealed her pregnancy from her parents; she claimed she did not know she was pregnant. There was no mention of a father. Callum was placed in foster care in April 2010, shortly after his birth, and was close to being adopted, but “eventually Wilson decided ‘her heart was saying’ she wanted to bring him home.” She took him home in November of 2010. From that point on, the only way to describe what he experienced at the hands of his mother is to say that he was in hell. Beginning in November, Emma Wilson

unleashed a series of vicious beatings on her defenceless son that caused his death. The final attack was so violent neighbours to Wilson’s flat recalled the ceiling shook with the force. Little Callum suffered a catastrophic brain injury and was left blind by the force of the blows. He died in hospital two days later in March 2011.

Doctors found Callum had old fractures to his ribs, arm, and leg that happened two weeks before his death.[[2]](#footnote-2)

His mother had him “buried in an unmarked communal grave.” Callum, by the way, means dove. In March of this year, his mother was sentenced to life in prison. She will remain there at least fourteen years.

Callum did not live the perfect life. This story is especially graphic. If I have wounded your sensibilities, I apologize—that is not my aim. This story was painfully graphic, but even without the details it would be unbearably painful, and we know, all too well, that such things happen, too often, and others read such stories and, aghast and pale, say to us, “How can you say, after reading that, that there is a loving, kind, and grace-giving God?!” And we may ourselves wonder, where is the hope? It seems small consolation, indeed, to say that Callum’s sufferings are over. The last four months out of the eleven months of his life were ceaseless misery and pain. Little Leo lived far too briefly; Callum lived far too long!

So how is it that we dare to proclaim, to announce aloud and abroad, that there is a loving, kind, grace-giving God? If we can do this at all, brothers and sisters, it is because God has revealed this to us in ways that we cannot deny, despite what the world regards as some of the strongest evidence to the contrary. He has revealed Himself to us by His Holy Spirit. He has revealed Himself to us in Christ Jesus. He reveals His nature to us in the words Jesus speaks to Martha there that day outside Bethany, words neither Martha, nor Mary, even, nor any of his disciples quite grasp, quite comprehend.

Now the first thing that Martha says to Jesus sounds just a little bit like an accusation: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (Jn 11:21). And it may even be that we have that thought, when we read about Callum, all the Callums, all the senseless brutality that destroys joy, destroys hope, destroys life in this sin-smashed world—Lord, if you had been here, this would not have happened.

Jesus tells Martha that her brother will rise again, and Martha responds as if she knows what Jesus means, but she doesn’t. Martha tells Jesus that she knows that her brother, who died suddenly, unexpectedly, “will rise again in the resurrection on the last day” (Jn 11:24). Martha thinks the resurrection is a time, a day, a when, some time, off in the future, the distant future, far off, not here, not now, not with us and among us in the solidarity of divine love.

Martha’s heart has been torn out; her life demolished with sorrow. She doesn’t fully realize with whom she is talking, who it is there, with her. Martha believes that the resurrection is a far off day, an event. She does not believe, does not understand, that the Resurrection is a who, a person, the one with her, there, now, in the solidarity of divine love. Jesus places this balm upon her wounded heart, her sorrowing soul, telling her: “I am the Resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (Jn 11:25-26). Where Christ is, there is Resurrection, there is life. Do you believe this? Jesus asks Martha that, but he’s not just asking Martha: he is asking you, today, now. In the presence of this Word, in the presence of this bread and this juice, he is asking you, today, now. Do you believe this?

How can I, when lives are cut short? Lazarus’ life was cut short. How can I, when the pure, gentle, and innocent are ruthlessly beaten and killed by those who ought most to love them? Jesus was ruthlessly beaten and killed by those who most ought to have loved him. He knew exactly what would be done to him. And he tells Martha, “I am the Resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

I want to share something with you, and ask that you contemplate it over the next few days: as Callum was being beaten to death, Jesus was there with him, not in his glorious robes, but in his broken nakedness, as he was left on the cross to die. Yet still Jesus. Jesus even there, with him, in solidarity of love.

Sisters and brothers, today we are in the deepest part of Lent. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, and after that, the days we commemorate during Holy Week: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and on Saturday, the long watch of the Great Vigil of Easter. I’ve shared some dark and sorrowful things with you today. I’ve asked you to explore the depths, the depths of the heart, and there is darkness there—so much darkness! But there is also hope. What comfort—the discovery of light, in the midst of that darkness!

My great-grandmother had that light and that hope even as she laid her baby daughter, her only daughter, into the dark, cool earth of an unmarked grave. Leo’s parents, in the midst of grief this very day, have that light and that hope. And I believe, so fully, so tenderly, so achingly, that Callum, that lovely, gentle dove, is enjoying the fulfillment of his hopes with God in God’s wonderful, joyful light. Oh yes, God is so happy to have Callum, and Leo, and Marian with Him. They’re His children, too, you see. And God assures us that, in Christ, we are also His children, whom He loves with a love that will not let us go.

Here at this table we see God’s love that will not let us go. God gives us love that we can hold. He gives us love that we can taste. We see bread. We see juice. By the Holy Spirit, by faith, bread and juice become so much more, are so much more, are so necessary to us, the most needful thing of all: Christ, his promises, his love, his life, his faith, his abundant, abundant grace.

Here, all the sickening brutality and senselessness, all the grief and sorrow of this sin-torn life is no longer utter hopelessness. Here, Christ gives us hope. Here, Jesus tells us, as he tells Martha, that he is present, that he is the Resurrection and the life. We don’t have to wait for a distant day. In Christ, we have the Resurrection. Here. Today. Now. It is already with us, already at work within us, drawing us through love to completion, drawing us through grace to God.

Jesus Christ is as close to us as this bread, this juice. He will come in to us to fill us with his light, his peace, and his grace. Marian, Leo, and Callum already know and have that joy in all its fullness and blessing, thank God! Let us ask God to assure us of the depth and breadth of His love for us. Invite God, now, to give you, here, the life-giving hope of the depth and breadth of His eternal, unchangeable love for you: His love that will not let you go.

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God’s judgments and how inscrutable God’s ways! For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be glory forever.

1. “Leo Wyzlic.” *Peoria Journal Star*, 30 March 2014, B7. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/callum-wilson-death-baby-killed-3309519 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)