



Like our brokenness, His suffering was ugly and real

Cleaning up the Cross?

By Russel Moldovan

One evening I arranged a surprise visit to my wife, Raylene, at work. When I reached her floor at the hospital, she walked out of the surgical room in medical scrubs soiled with blood from top to bottom. She was literally a bloody mess. It shocked me. Never before had I imagined her in this light. When she came home from work, all I saw was Raylene—all cleaned up.

Clean Lives?

Raylene's messy bloodiness is normal for a hospital. But most of us never see what really happens in hospitals. Hospitals usher visitors to clean, sterile waiting rooms. These neat and tidy locations are designed so that outsiders don't disrupt medical procedures or see too much of what really happens in a hospital.

Is this perhaps how we like to live our lives—spotless, stainless, spick-and-span? How often are we tempted to sanitize our lives—no blood, no death, no suffering?

Clean Faith?

Perhaps we are guilty of cleaning up our faith. My grandmother once said that the Bible is a dirty book. She meant no disrespect. She meant that the Bible is honest. Just as it contains clean stories, it has some dirty ones. It tells us the truth of our sinful misery. It is not a fantasy book whose writers edited away the messy behavior of God's people like Lot, Tamar, Rahab, or David. Instead, it confesses the disordered lives of some of our favorite saints. The Bible pulls no punches. It tells it like it was. We were sinners, and we were in a mess because of it.

Personally, I prefer clean and organized worship. Could you imagine what it would be like if the sanctuary were unkempt? Hymnals and last week's worship bulletins scattered on the floor. Unwashed Communion trays placed on the pulpit. We expect a good sermon to be neatly organized and packaged to answer all of the nagging questions of life. But what do we do with the questions that resurface after the sermon is finished?

Clean Cross?

In our sanctuary, there is a cross that is 15 feet tall by 8 feet wide. It weighs about 300 pounds. Years ago the men of the church hewed it from two enormous logs. It stands erect in the middle of our sanctuary. Each year our congregation reenacts the passion of Christ with Jesus hanging from that hewed cross.

Today where Jesus' head would have been, there is a large red stain. It is left over after our last performance, when some of the imitation blood of Jesus rubbed off.

Recently one of our drama directors gave a marvelous Communion meditation. She explained that one Sunday morning during Communion she looked up and noticed the blood on the hewed cross and thought, *What a mess. Why didn't I see that before? I need to get a ladder and clean that off.*

Then it hit her. *I can't do that. Why am I trying to clean up the cross? It is not mine to clean. The cross belongs to Jesus. The blood of Jesus belongs there.*

I love my Protestant heritage, but I must wrestle with the historical fact

that Protestantism cleaned up the cross. "Why has the Catholic Church opted to leave the body of Christ on the cross?" This is the question I posed to my friend, a local Catholic priest.

"The Catholic church," he explained, "kept the body on the cross to emphasize the cost, the sacrifice. Many Protestant reformers took the body off because it was too gruesome."

Some might argue that to leave the body on the cross paints a sad story. It neglects the resurrection. That is possible; nevertheless, we must remember there is no resurrection without the cross.

I sense a trend among Christians to escape the cross. Many current Christian books and sermons offer claims of fixing the problems of our lives if we just learn to pray the right words, have a positive attitude, think the right things, or go to the right Christian gatherings. Who needs Jesus or the cross? We have *The Prayer of Jabez*. A friend explained to me how this book was the answer to his spiritual stagnation. Unfortunately, the book says little about the person of Jesus, little about the gospel, and absolutely nothing about the cross. And these have remained the essence of our faith for 2,000 years.

Not long after the 9/11 tragedy, I went to New York City and saw the charred remains of what used to be the World Trade Center towers. There I saw many photographs of faces of lost loved ones taped to the chain-link fences that enclosed that

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sacred spot that had come to be known as Ground Zero. With the photos, there were messages. "Daddy, I love you." "Son, I will miss you." "My dearest wife, I will never forget you."

I asked myself, "As a Christian community, what is our response to the victims of such human misery and their families? Just turn to Jesus and your problems will go away? Just come to church and pray this little prayer and you will be happy? Just read this book and the blessings will fall from Heaven?" But then what are we to tell them when the happiness is gone?

In the midst of such suffering, perhaps words and rationalization

have no say. Perhaps our only response is to look toward the Christ on the cross. It is there that God shows us that He has joined us in our suffering.

John 3:14, 15 explains that as Moses lifted up the brazen serpent, so must Jesus be lifted up on a cross. As the snake-bitten Israelites were healed by looking upon the brazen serpent, so shall we be healed by looking upon and believing in the Christ on the cross. Jesus must be lifted up. Yes, in glory, but first in humility. It is twofold.

The ascension and crucifixion are inextricably connected. There is no crown without the cross. Christ on the cross is the ultimate sign that God has opted not to remove himself from the mess and gore of our lives. Yes, we believe in the

power of the resurrection, but sometimes the temptation is to hurry to the empty tomb. Perchance we are ready to move from the merriness of Christmas to the joy of Easter while skipping over the cross. And yet it is only the cross that makes resurrection possible.

In Catholic liturgy, every Mass is a reenactment of Calvary. In God there is no time. Thus, for Catholics, every Mass witnesses the passion of Christ all over again. For them, the crucifix becomes the place that God embraces our disordered and cluttered lives—with our

wounds and our grief. It is there that God suffered with us and still suffers with us even today.

In our brokenness and pain, we don't need another book, spiritual method,

or religious rally; we need Jesus—the one who hung and in some ways still hangs on the cross for us today. Only He has the power to heal, and there is no substitute.

The cross reminds us that God is not removed from our misery. He is not simply watching difficult events unfold from the safety of some cloud. God is not simply reclining on a throne in some heavenly magical kingdom. God is buried in the rubble of the World Trade Center. He is present in the suffering of an Iraqi battlefield. And with us, God cries out in the messiness of the rubble of our lives.

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Russel Moldovan ministers with the Blanchard (Pennsylvania) Church of Christ.