

PASSION (PALM) SUNDAY | APRIL 13, 2025
ISAIAH 43:16-21 | PSALM 126 | PHILIPPIANS 3:4B-14 | LUKE 23:1-49

“Hurt people hurt people.” It’s an old cliché that people invoke to explain why we act out against others. When someone is cruel or hateful or disrespectful to us, we might say, “Who hurt you?” And having been hurt, we might unwittingly pass this harm on to others. As if by making others hurt, we can make ourselves feel better.

“Hurt people hurt people” is an oversimplification, of course. But there’s something true in it. Hurt gets passed from generation to generation, from neighborhood to neighborhood, relationship to relationship. The effects of sin and our violence against other people are not isolated events that spring up at random. They repeat themselves in cycles. When we are hurt, our impulse is often to hit back. And if we can’t hit back, we’ll take it out on whoever is nearby.

And so we have conflicts that stretch back decades if not centuries. We have our own politics of backlash and resentment. Closer to home, our families may be places of strained relationships and generational harm.

And of course, even our churches are not immune. I was recently chatting with another pastor in the synod about some conflicts in their church. I expected it was something with the upcoming budget or a new staff hire. But it was because of an incident that had happened forty years ago. The people who were involved are all long gone. But the hurt is still getting passed on.

It seems inevitable. Hurt people hurt people. And truth is, we’re all hurting.

It was much the same in Jesus’s day, too. Judas is hurt that Jesus isn’t the messiah he wants, so he betrays him. Herod is hurt by John the Baptist’s popularity, so he kills him. One of the criminals crucified with Jesus is hurt by Jesus’s seeming passivity, so he mocks him. The characters in these stories are always reacting. *Well, they did this, so I had to... Well, they said this, so I had no choice but to... Well, they wanted to, so I needed to...*

Reacting this way makes us feel powerful. It makes us feel like we’re doing something. It makes it feel like we’re asserting our agency.

But the irony is that it’s just the opposite. Because when you’re in that reactive posture, who is the person who’s determining your action? It’s not you. It’s always somebody else. They are the ones who determine how you act.

St. Luke has a different take on this. For Luke, power isn’t when you punch back harder than you were hit. Power is when you’re hurt by others and, instead of just hitting back, you decide for yourself how you want to proceed. Power isn’t about what that person just did. Power is knowing my calling, my values, and my purpose.

So who is the most powerful character in the passion story? It’s not Pilate. It’s not Herod. It’s not the soldiers or the guards. It’s not Peter or Judas. The most powerful character in the story is Jesus.

And why is he the most powerful character in the story? Because he never resorts to violence. Never hits back at his tormentors. Never gives up his mission. Never appeals to an authority outside himself.

At the very beginning of his ministry, Luke said that Jesus went to his hometown and said that he was here to “bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed.”

And what does Jesus do at the end of his life? Nothing different. Even as he's dying, Jesus gives hope to a captive. Even as he's dying, Jesus prays for those who persecute him. Even as he's dying, Jesus sets free those who are oppressed.

God deals with our sin and violence not by retaliating in kind but by taking this sin into God's self. The hurt isn't passed on. The hurt is absorbed into Christ's heart. And so here, on the cross, the cycle of violence breaks. Hurt people hurt people. But a hurt Jesus loves them.

If that was the end of the story, Jesus would be nothing more than a martyr. An innocent person who died. A sad story for us to remember. But thanks to the gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus's power is now given to us. We are powerful beyond all measure. But it's a different kind of power than we're used to seeking. It's not Pilate's power that's always making excuses. It's not Judas's power that's angling for influence. It's not Peter's power that is courageous when it's easy. It's Christ's power. Power to forgive those who hurt us. Power to pray for those who persecute us. Power to seek reconciliation instead of stewing in grievance. Power to seek greatness through service.

This is kind of community God calls and equips us to be. This is true for the entire Christian church. But it is especially true for a congregation that elected to call itself "Community of the Cross." Talk about high expectations! It would certainly be a lot easier to be "Normandale Highlands Lutheran Church."

To be a community of the cross means that we are not a community defined by wealth. Or defined by race or ethnicity. Or defined by zip code or demographics. To be a community of the cross is to be a community defined by Jesus's love, that exercises his kind of merciful power.

Hurt people hurt people. But you know what else? Forgiven people forgive people. Healed people heal people. And loved people love people.

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