

Easter, 2010, The Rev. Bradley C. Dyche

Allow me to turn our thoughts to Tommy.

Tommy was a student in T-1 when I was in first grade. T-1 was “transitional first”, a class for those who have “special needs.” My Mother taught the T-1 class that year, because there were no openings for art teachers. Tommy had dark, cropped hair, pale skin, and deep blue eyes. He had a smile as big as China, and though he was labeled as retarded (and sometimes was a bit, how shall I say it, slobbery) he seemed like a normal enough kid to me. My Mother reminded me that he was normal, and that he was only “mildly retarded.”

After school, I often had to wait for my Mom to finish her class work and set up for the following day. Waiting after school is only part of the pain of being a teacher’s child. But Tommy was often right there with me. He was waiting for his Mother who was often late because of her own work.

So, we were thrown together, Tommy and me, at times when we would probably both rather be outside or at least in front of a good boob tube watching the Scoob. Instead, we played games. Checkers, cards, hangman, anything really, except the physical stuff. Tommy was not extremely well-coordinated. But we laughed, and the friendship grew. We even began to say “hello” in the halls. And we had a few play-dates. Our Mothers became friendly.

On my seventh birthday, I invited Tommy to my birthday party. Everyone in my class had been invited. It was to be a rather large fete, though in all reality, the reason for such grandiose festivities was not benign and was twofold. First, it was a ruse for me to get lots of birthday loot, and secondly, it was the Olympics for my Mother to compete for the silent but important “best birthday party giving Mother of the year” Gold Medal Award. Being the early 80’s, my birthday party was tritely themed around ET. I was to have a special ordered ice cream cake in the shape of that particular alien’s bulbous head, not to mention a pinata. The night before, I could hardly sleep. Dreams of presents and alien themed games danced in my head. The next morning, though, while playing with my sister, Cherilyn Nettie, I was swung around and around and smack dab into a bedpost, a supposed “accident,” that was enough to make preparations halt.

Blood poured. Screams for, “MOM! Look at what she did” were made, and I was rushed to the ER for stitches. My birthday party dreams ran down my face just as quickly as the salty tears. With the possibility of a concussion and fresh stitches, I was soon informed that my party would be reduced to blasted bored board games and bingo. WHY GOD? No tag, no red light/green light, and no ET Pinata, bursting forth with sugar satiation and blindfolded kids wielding weapons to procure said sugar. The pain seemed like too much. That is, it seemed like too much until my Mother pointed out that this would all be better for Tommy. To say that my Mother and I put away our dreams is to say how much we cared for Tommy. And the party was better for my accident. We played bingo. I still got loot. My mother came off like a Saint. Just don’t tell my sister that the wound has healed.

I had unknowingly bridged two worlds that did not want to be bridged, Tommy's and my own. The next week, I saw Tommy at recess. He was sitting in the sand, and I joined him. Soon, some of my other friends followed. They had not been impressed at my party, and they began making fun of Tommy, his uncoordinated movements and his aforementioned slobber.

And as you might expect from supposedly "innocent" children on a playground, with only two teachers supervising 10 classes, the event turned worse. My supposed friends made Tommy eat dirt. "Maybe it will dry up your spit," one kid said. I said nothing. I stepped back and watched in horror. My Mom and my teacher were not on duty, and I did not know the ones who were. Tommy just confusedly spat and sputtered the saliva mud out, and I was left with the image of his betrayed, hurt eyes looking to me. I went back to class in shock. I told no one. No teacher knew or saw.

At 3 o'clock, I went to my Mother's classroom, fully expecting to meet an angry Tommy and an angry Mother, and punishment. Honestly, I would have welcomed punishment in my shame. I deserved it. But Tommy had cleaned himself up. And he only smiled at me. He still smiled. And he looked at me through those same cool blue eyes... with kindness. We played games for a while, before our Mothers took us home.

But the thing that I still cannot understand about Tommy is why and how he forgave me, and why, for that matter, did he still smile? This morning, on Easter morning, that is the same question I have for God and for Jesus. Why did he forgive us? And why did he come back?

I am not alone in my wonder. We are told in the *Gospel of John* that Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb, expecting to find death and odor, only to be terrified and confused by a stone rolled away. She runs to tell Peter and others. Peter and the beloved disciple go to the tomb along with Mary and are amazed but un-understanding. They just return home while Mary Magdalene sits weeping. No one has any idea what to make of this Jesus who does not stay in the tomb. The first reaction to resurrection is not joy and happiness. It is shock and disbelief.

And let's be honest, there was much to disbelieve and to be shocked by. First, there is the whole death to life thing. Need I say more? But secondly, a God coming back to life would not necessarily be a good thing. As Keith said on Good Friday, there was plenty of blame to go around. The idea that Jesus could come back would be terrifying. What if he came back and did not forgive? What if he were the Terminator?

Luckily, that is not our God. Our God is the type of God who sends his son as a vulnerable child to teach us to love one another. And when most of us could not or would not listen, He does not send a flood. Instead, even as a lynch mob is forming, Jesus washes his disciples' feet and shares bread and wine with the very friends whom he knows will betray him.

And Jesus goes to the cross, not because God wants him there, but because that is where God is willing to bet the farm. God hangs on the cross and cries out forgiveness, and shows us that this is the only path to new life.

So to me, Easter is more than pre-modern magic tricks or the retelling of a pagan myth. To me, it would be easy for God to only raise a corpse. The world of Jesus was full of such accounts. It's God, after all. Zip, zap, zoo. Done! POWER! Rather, the real miracle of Easter is that God engages in the hard work of forgiveness, of us. We are given grace. God goes to the places of shame in our lives, even the shame of the cross and the shame that we have likewise been part of lynch mobs, and still loves us. God looks at us as Tommy looked at me, and God smiles.

And somehow, I do believe that such a love can move mountains, rise above the worst parts of life, and raise the dead. To me, this is proof that this man was and is the Son of God. Who else could even envision such a path? Forgiveness seems impossible to imagine in so many ways and at so many times. Even the righteous want revenge. And we all carry the baggage of someone we cannot forgive. We are a broken hearts club. And yet, God calls us beyond that.

And he calls the world. I confess that I want the world to bow before the resurrected Jesus. But to say that I want the world to bow before Jesus is not to say that I want a hypocritical church to claim world supremacy even as it abuses children. We all know how well that works. It is not even to say that I even want us to use the word Christian, or that I want to hate those who use that word and still abuse. It is rather to say that I want us all to do the hard work of forgiving those who have truly hurt us, including ourselves, and to say that this is the only true path of salvation for our world. And I want us to trust that forgiving, self-sacrificing love is stronger than every power, even death.

I wish that I could say these words to Tommy. I wish that I could tell him what his forgiveness meant, and that I have forgiven others. But I have no idea where he is. I share this story, because I hope that it can show to you what it showed to me.... The face of the resurrected Jesus. ON this feast of feasts, let us trust in the saving power of forgiveness. Let us hand our unforgiveness to God and make shouts of "alleluia". Let us enjoy this amazing day, in which God looks at us like Tommy and smiles... and like me and Tommy after school, we all wait for our Mothers to take us home.