

THE TERRIBLE BRILLIANCE

I'll tell you a story. My wife is an art teacher for kids who are really really sick, a job filled with hilarity and pain, a job she loves, a job that makes her shiver and go for long walks in the hills. She spent a lot of time recently doing art projects with a kid who got sicker and sicker and endured oceans of pain and grew more swollen and weary by the day, and one day I came home to find my wife sad to the bottom of her bones. I asked her what the matter was and she said some things that haunt me still, and I think you should hear them.

She's being crucified said my wife. Everything they do to her hurts. All those needles are nails. All the mothers watching and wincing and weeping in the shower later. All the little crucifixions. She just accepts it. She never complains. She gets crucified every day. All the little children being crucified. Why does this happen? Why does this happen? There was nothing to say, of course, so I didn't say anything and the next day she went back up to the hospital and did art projects with the kids who are really really sick.

You know what we never talk about when we talk about our faith? The awful genius of it, the horrific honesty. We say that Christ died for us because we need some terrible inarticulate way to hold death quivering in our hearts. We need some way to pray for that kid and all the kids like her and the only way that makes any sense is the nonsensical, illogical, unreasonable, insupportable, unprovable conviction that one time long ago a thin young mysterious eloquent Jewish guy was crucified and died and then he came alive again in a way that no one understood then and no one understands now. If that happened, then there is a way for us to live amid the sea of death; if it didn't happen we are only compost, awake for a time and then put to work as seething soil.

I am not talking theological babble or pontifical edict or regulatory murk. I am talking about the haunting human genius in the marrow of Catholicism. A mother watched her son be tortured and crucified and she held him in her arms and there are not words for what she felt. A mother watched her daughter be tortured and crucified as she held her in her arms and there are no words for what she felt. It happens all day every day everywhere. All the little crucifixions. All the tiny Christs. The terrible brilliance of our faith is that there isn't one Christ, there are billions, and each one suffers for and saves the rest, in ways that we will never understand. All we can do is tiptoe into a kid's room, and spread out all the holy colors on her bed, and make her laugh, and witness her pain and courage, and sing her grace under duress. Somehow she will come alive again, and there will be a light on her mother's face for which there are no words, and all the things we ever said about what we believe will turn out to be true. That will be a good day. That will be the best day ever.

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Brian Doyle, Editor

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