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Oftentimes, life unfolds in the backyard.

It seems to me that the greater things common to human existence—love, hatred, competition, survival of the fittest—reveal themselves in the backyard, just on a smaller scale.

Take this week, for example. As you know, this past week is called Holy Week in the Christian church around the world. We mark this week by immersing ourselves in the suffering and passion of Jesus Christ. We steep ourselves in his pain, in his sacrifice, and in his death. We ponder our own pain and mortality. We then hunger and thirst for the relief of Easter, when these temporary things are vanquished by the forever things of God, namely, grace and forgiveness and healing and life beyond the grave.

On the one hand, Holy Week is celebrated around the world in a wide variety of serene and beautiful ways—the chanting of ancient liturgies, the bittersweet washing of feet, the profound sharing of Christ's last supper with his friends. On the other hand, there is Holy Week in my backyard, which is never described as serene and rarely described as beautiful.

A few Holy Week observations from the backyard of 212 Spring Street, Calamus, Iowa.

The cross in the berm was erected on Maundy Thursday. It is draped with a black cloth to commemorate the crucifixion of Jesus. It remains there during Good Friday and Holy Saturday and even through Easter Sunday, when the cloth is changed to white in celebration of Christ's resurrection.

Simply by virtue of its location in the berm, this cross stands directly in the crossfire of the many and varied neighborhood activities that take place in the backyard of 212 Spring Street. Many army battles and skirmishes took place around the cross on Good Friday and Holy Saturday, involving various Nerf guns, pretend hand grenades and make believe land mines. I saw boys and girls chasing each other in the heat of battle around the cross, through the berm, down the sidewalks and up the trees. Some were wounded or worse and laid down at the foot of the cross, arms crossed on their chests, signaling to the pretend Red Cross medics that they were to be carried to the nearest pretend first aid station. At first, I saw and disapproved of these army battles taking place around the cross and opened my kitchen window to yell at the kids, but then I thought of the greater irony, the global reality of how many battles and skirmishes and wars and inquisitions and crusades have been made around the cross and in the name of the cross, and I did not yell at them, for they were simply doing what generations of grown ups have done before them, only not pretend.

That was Good Friday.

Yesterday, early in the morning on Holy Saturday, I went down to the berm to retrieve a wayward baseball glove and glanced up at the cross, and then did a long double take, for there was blood on the cross. Yes, there was the unmistakable yet smeared bloody print of a little hand. I asked the kids, “What happened here?” None fessed up. They all mumbled something about something that might or might not have happened. Later on I noticed them furtively washing the blood off the cross with a stolen bucket of water from the outside spout. Again, there is the big irony—how much human blood has been shed on account of the cross of Jesus? Not only his own blood, but blood shed by the martyrs, the saints, the apostles, persecuted Christians around the world and across the generations?

That was yesterday morning.

In the afternoon, I looked down at the berm and saw one of the children carrying a tray of cups of water for his friends who were sitting in the mulch, tired out by their game of tag. They each took a cup and were visibly refreshed by the cool drink. They then pulled out their bags of Easter candy from the egg hunt that had previously taken place, and they proceeded to trade and share, kindly, patiently. For a brief time, there was harmony at the foot of the cross—there was the sound of laughter carried on the breeze, there was the haunting echo of children's voices bouncing between neighborhood houses and garages. A strange image of communion, but one that came to mind nonetheless...the sharing, the

fellowship, the refreshment. A big, beautiful irony—rare and gorgeous moments when we humans get it...when we serve one another, when we enjoy one another, when we love one another.

There were funny, small moments of big ironies, as well, such as when a child tried to hide behind the cross in a game of hide-and-seek...and they found out they could not hide behind the cross when they were discovered by the seeker...as humans discover anew with each passing generation that we, too, cannot hide behind the cross with our silly ideologies and forced doctrines of exclusion. There was the one child who tried to knock the cross over by riding his bike straight into it, and that didn't end so well for him. The cross remained strong and straight as an arrow, and yet he was stunned and bruised, as are we whenever we try to knock over the cross by our sheer stubbornness.

And then there is my own heaviness of heart as today my sons are with their father, and although I know he is providing them with a lovely Easter and they are having a wonderful day with family, I do miss them...even though I yelled at them an awful lot these last few days in their play around the cross...just as you bring your own particular heaviness of heart with you today, even to mix with the joyful celebration of Easter and all of the glorious fulfilled promises that go with it, there are still the realities of life itself that we simply cannot lay down, even though we desperately want to.

And yet, the sheer and wonderful proclamatory joy is that all of these peculiar human things that unfold around the cross *belong there*...that we are not chased away from the cross because we are not appropriately serene or beautiful, that none of this shocks God...that not an ounce of our drama makes God revoke the promises that he rains down on this world...that our warring and our fighting and our bloodshed and our trickery and our stubbornness make God somehow love us less...that God delights in those rare moments when the weapons are laid down and there is communion of body and soul between fellow human beings who are all engaged in the same game of simply trying to figure out what life is all about.

All of it has—and all of us have—a distinct place at the foot of the cross, there is room for all people—the warring ones, the fallen ones, the hiding ones, the seeking ones, the ones seeking to make peace, the grieving ones, the absent ones—all of us are gathered together at the foot of the cross of Jesus, and somehow, in his infinite love, he manages to hold us all together in a bizarre and beautiful backyard resurrection reality.