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This is one of the most difficult sermons I have preached since coming to Calamus, and in just a few moments you will see why. You will also have noticed by now that my sermon illustrations based on the boys have become less frequent the older they get, which is only appropriate since they are now old enough to pay attention to what's being said in church. For this morning's sermon, I asked Jacob and Christian specifically if it was ok to use this particular situation as an illustration, and they both said yes.

So I will set it up for you, and you will immediately see why this illustration is so difficult to share with you, but also so very fitting for this morning.

A few weeks back, the boys were running upstairs to get ready to take their evening showers. I noticed Christian pull his belt through the loops and swing it around his head like a lasso, chasing the other two upstairs. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out that that wasn't going to end well, so I followed them upstairs, pausing only to pick up some laundry to carry up on my way. In those few seconds that I lapsed behind, I managed to catch with my very own eyes, and with crystal clarity, the following scene: Christian swung his belt around his head three or four times and then brought it down on Jacob's bare back, buckle end first. Jacob's back arched reflexively and he screamed in pain. Christian got two more licks in by the time I reached them. Within seconds, the flesh on Jake's back had already begun to form welts.

Without even thinking, I grabbed Christian's arms and wrapped them around my waist so that his bare back was facing Jacob, and I commanded Jacob to pick up the belt and give Christian 3 lashes...not 2 and not 4, but 3, the exact number he had just received. They both looked at me like I was crazy, and I just said, "Do it." And Jacob did. And Christian screamed in pain, just like Jacob had, and his back arched, just like Jacob's had, and during those three lashes I held his arms so he couldn't move. As I held him, I felt sick to my stomach. In fact, it almost made me wretch.

In a flash, it was all over. I said to Christian, "You are the one who started this. Did you feel good whipping your brother with the belt?"

"No," he said.

"Jacob, did it make you feel better to whip Christian back?" I asked.

"No," he answered.

"So who won?" I asked them.

They looked at each other and said, "Nobody."

And they are right.

Our sense of justice and fairness doesn't solve anything.

An eye for an eye doesn't work.

Giving someone a taste of their own medicine only ramps up a situation that is already out of control.

Nobody wins.

Is the world any more in control in these tens of thousands of years since Adam and Eve? Is there even a trace of order and fairness and justice, anywhere on the planet? No, because our human systems are not founded on justice and fairness; they are founded

on revenge and retribution. And you know as well as I that once a cycle of revenge begins, it never ends. Nobody wins.

And that is the point I tried to illustrate to the boys in the example I just shared with you. Judge my parenting however you want to, I did this so that the perpetrator could experience the pain he had just inflicted on the victim, and so that the victim could experience the power of revenge. And nobody won.

To be honest, I didn't empathize so much with either one of the boys in that situation, because I've seen both be perpetrator and victim a hundred times before. But, in a flash, I did feel a sudden jolt of empathy for God, which was a strange thing. Here's why.

As I held Christian's arms, and as I felt his back arch against my legs when the belt buckle hit his back and as I heard him scream, I suddenly saw the image of Jesus being flogged and whipped in Pilate's court. In my mind, I saw his arms bound (chained to a wall? Tied around a column? Shackled to the ceiling?) and, in my mind, I saw the whip come crashing down on his bare back, with jagged pieces of glass and metal tied to the ends, to gauge and mangle his flesh as he is whipped. This image is not new to us, it is the passion of Jesus, it is the blood and tears and sweat he sheds on his way to his crucifixion, it is the story we face every Holy Week. We focus on the suffering and pain that Jesus endured for us, how he paid for our sins with his very own life, how he exchanged his death for ours—dying so that we could live forever. We focus on Jesus, and rightfully so, since he's the one who does the work to win salvation for the world.

But what about his Father? I've always somewhat uncomfortably wondered about him. What's *HE* doing this whole time? Does the Father just awkwardly and idly stand on the sidelines, watching the history of salvation unfold while he twiddles his almighty thumbs? How can a father watch his son suffer like that and do absolutely nothing? Well, maybe the Father's not doing nothing, like we've assumed for so long. If we believe God to be triune—that is, Father, Son and Spirit—then we must believe that when the Son suffers, his Father suffers also...and anyone who has kids or is a kid—even a grownup one—knows this is true.

A parent suffers when they hold their infant's legs down to receive their first vaccinations. A parent suffers when their wobbly toddler lets go of their hands and falls down for the first time. A parent suffers to push the bike once the training wheels are off and the child crashes into the curb. A parent suffers to throw the child into the lake because they are ready to swim on their own. A parent suffers when they wave goodbye to their school-aged kid, and the kid comes home saying he was made fun of. A parent suffers to let the teenaged child go out on a first date, and suffers when the child cries with their first broken heart. A parent suffers when the child takes the car keys and drives off into the night. A parent suffers when the grown up child loses their job, when their marriage fails, when they declare bankruptcy. A parent suffers to when their child is diagnosed with cancer and dies before they do. A parent suffers when a grandbaby is born with a heart defect. There is a bond between parent and child—and whether you are the parent or the child, you can understand the bond between Jesus and his Father.

And so when Jesus suffers, his Father is there...pushing Judas' hand into the dish at the same time as Jesus...guiding the Roman soldiers to the Garden of Gethsemane...standing in the courtyard while the crowd shouts, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"...holding Jesus' arms for him to be beaten and whipped...pushing him up the hill

to Golgotha...stretching out Jesus' hands so that the soldiers could nail them to the cross...pushing and straining and hoisting the cross high on the hill while his Son screams and writhes and bleeds above him...covering his ears while Jesus cries out, "Daddy, where are you?"...throwing a tantrum of rage and grief when his Son dies, exploding rocks, tossing the dead from their graves, shaking the whole earth, covering the sun with a giant hand so that the whole world sits in blackness...finally, sobbing and gently pulling his Son's dead body down from the cross and gently laying it in Joseph's tomb, closing the dead eyes, kissing the dead lips, caressing the dead forehead of his only Son...blasting open a path to a fiery hot hell where Satan waits for the fight to begin, dancing like a maniac in his corner, thrashing and gnashing with claws and teeth in his lusty anticipation of destroying God's precious Son forever.

And that's where our Gospel leaves us today, in hell.

We are left in the middle of the story, for it is a story to be continued...

Today we are left with the story of a Son, who endures unimaginable pain and suffering for you, who takes your pain and suffering and bears it on his own shoulders, who dies, along with your pain and suffering so that when you die your pain and suffering will die, too...

We are left with a Father, who never leaves his Son's side...not for a single moment, holding his Son tight while the world whips him and crucifies him, in order to show the world that our system does not work...that our ways of humiliating the good and celebrating the bad are broken...that our sense of order and justice is completely upside down and inside out...that our ways of deception and corruption and violence will never, ever win.

That is why the Father holds the Son while he is whipped and crucified, because he knows his Son must die in order for a new way, a new kingdom to begin...death to the old ways, a new birth to the new ways. We think execution and death have the final word. God shows us that resurrection and life have the final word. God's ways are not our ways.

All of God suffers this week...the Son marches to his death, the sacrificial lamb that will save the whole world...the Father holds his Son for the world to kill, knowing he will not get the reprieve that Abraham got, that no angel will tell the world to stop in the 11th hour, knowing he will have to look upon the death of his only child...the Spirit takes this story of unbreakable and unconditional love from the pages of the Bible right past your ears and into your heart, making you more than just an observer, more than just a passerby, and even more than just a participant, but a recipient—in this miraculous story of salvation...

This week, all of God—Father, Son and Spirit—suffers for you.

Next week, all of God triumphs.

But, first things first.