Columns
Horizons
Social Justice



Detail from "Ecco Homo" (1896) by Hungarian artist Mihaly Munkacsy (Wikimedia Commons)



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Every year during Holy Week services, as we read the story of Jesus' passion and death, I find it hard to say the words, "Crucify him!" out loud. Perhaps part of it is my own theology. I do believe that Jesus died for the sake of our collective liberation. I don't, however, resonate with the idea that my own sins are the thorns or the nails that pierced Jesus.

This year, as I was reflecting on the Passion narrative on Palm Sunday, my attention was drawn to one detail included in Matthew's version of the story: "The chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas but to destroy Jesus." Shortly thereafter, those same people in the crowd are yelling that they want Jesus to be violently killed.

In the 30-some years I have been listening to the Passion narrative read aloud during Holy Week, I don't think I've ever thought much about the people in the crowd. Who were they? Why were they there? Were they drawn in by curiosity?

Maybe they had witnessed Jesus speak in public or heard rumors about him. Maybe a family member or friend had been healed by Jesus. Maybe they just happened to be out shopping in the market or running errands. Maybe they were moms or dads who themselves had been feeling the weight of the oppressive Roman regime, and were looking for an outlet. Did they desire desperately to fit in, to be enough, to be able to put food on the table for their own families?

Perhaps some of them came already in disagreement with Jesus, whom they saw as an agitator threatening the status quo. Others may have come into the crowd unsure of where they stood, and then been convinced by the authority figures who whispered fear into their ears.

Whatever the case, within a few hours, they were all swept up in a political spectacle to place blame on a man who had been preaching, teaching and healing among them for days and weeks. Something moved these people enough that they were inspired to shout, "Crucify him!"

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As a "One" on the Enneagram, I can resonate with the temptation to judge and want to find blame outside myself. I have a constant inner critic just itching to point out imperfections and look for ways I or others around me need to change. This inner critic says things like, "Ugh, how inconsiderate!" when the man next to me on the plane takes his shoes off.

Critic says, "Get to work, Tracey. Now is not the time to take a break," when I'm staring down at a long to-do list. And when I notice the person in front of me at the grocery piled a bunch of sodas and sugary snacks onto the conveyor belt, critic certainly has something judge-y to say about the health impacts of such irresponsible decisions.

Not quite, "Crucify them!" but this voice of judgment does seem to fit well among the voices in the crowd ready to place blame alongside the chief priests and elders.

My own conversion is a work in progress. Even as I walk my journey toward acceptance and empathy, I spend a lot of time at my ministry engaging others to do the same. In my work in education and advocacy at the Kino Border Initiative, I accompany people as they learn about the reality at the U.S.-Mexico border, with a hope to transform hearts, minds and policies toward more dignified migration.

It turns out that conversations about people on the move can sometimes resemble the finger-pointing mob the evangelists describe in the Passion narrative. As I accompany students, parishioners, seminarians and teachers from all over the U.S., I sometimes hear comments like, "Well, why don't these people fix their own country instead of coming to ours?" or "How do you know someone is telling the truth when they say they are fleeing violence?" or "We need to keep migrants out because they're bringing drugs into the U.S."

Something softens in me when I hear these comments because I can relate. Earlier in my life, when I felt far away from people in migration, I had some similar sentiments. (Read more about my own transformation into an advocate for more

dignified migration here.)

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Last month, I traveled to one of our partner institutions to give a presentation. I invited those present for the event to turn to the people at their table and share what words, phrases or images came to mind for them when they heard the word "migrant."

I then sat down at the closest table just in time to hear the woman next to me say, "Well, I think of the words 'legal' and 'illegal.' I just think people should come the legal way. I have a family member trying to migrate now, and he's going through the whole process: filling out the paperwork, paying the fees, and other people are just coming in without doing that."

I took a deep breath and nodded as I processed what she was saying and discerned how I would respond. My heart was pounding, but I wanted to get curious and learn more about this woman.

"That must be really hard to have someone you love who wants to access a process and reunite with his family and can't," I said. "What has that been like for your family?"

I listened as the woman described the frustration of having to wait, the ways that family separation has affected her loved ones, and how living with such uncertainty meant their future was on hold.

Then I said, "You know, what you're sharing reminds me a lot of the families who are waiting in Mexico to access safety. They arrive with the intention to follow an orderly, legal process to seek asylum, but feel frustrated by the barriers that the U.S. government has put in place. Many people have been waiting weeks or months, like your relative, and simply don't know what to do."

There was something freeing about putting aside my inner judge, looking this woman in the eye, and listening to her pain. As I remember the encounter, I can imagine the two of us moving away from the angry mob in the Passion narrative so we could hear one another and take a beat before shouting, "Crucify him!"

I don't know how the woman felt after our conversation, but I walked away full of gratitude. Our encounter left me wondering how our world would be transformed if, instead of gathering in angry mobs, we could replicate over and over this space to ask questions and tell stories.

It's messy, it takes time, and it's not an easy fix. But I imagine, if we give God's grace the space to stretch our hearts, the Holy One will replace our own shouts of "Crucify him!" with cries of "What hurts?" and "I see you," and "I'm sorry." Maybe even "I love you."