

**Message: “God of Sorrows is the God of Love”**

**Esperanza and I recently watched the series “From Scratch” on Netflix.** It’s a love story based on the life of the author, Tembi Locke. It’s about a woman named Amy from LA who meets and falls in love with a man named Lino from Sicily. They’re both creative types. Lino is a chef. Amy’s an artist. They fall in love, get married, go through some work and relationship challenges and then face a major crisis: he’s diagnosed with cancer. He gets an experimental treatment, and the cancer goes into remission. They then adopt an infant girl and name her Idalia. *[spoiler alert]*

**Five years later, the cancer returns.** This time, there are complications and Lino dies. Amy struggles with her loss. She struggles with her role as Mom to a five-year-old. Amy struggles to relate to her family. Her sister has a difficult, heart-to-heart talk, saying, “You aren’t the only one grieving. You lost a husband. But I’m losing a sister. You’re going away right in front of me.”

**Amy travels to Sicily to take her husband’s ashes to his family.** She doesn’t want to be there. Amy doesn’t know what to do or how to relate. But, over time, she begins to connect with her husband’s family, the locals and their simple way of life. They are people of faith, though traditional in a way she is not. She and her mother-in-law connect and find a meaningful relationship. Amy realizes she found home in a place she couldn’t imagine.

**Tembi reflects on what she’ll tell her daughter, “Pain is part of life.** That much I knew. If I could just teach her how to be resilient, how to love big, how to fear less. How to weather hurt, either at the hands of others or even the hurts she might unknowingly inflict. I wanted her to know love can come in many forms. Sometimes it can look like letting go, but it can also look like never letting go. One day she might have to love someone in ways the world wasn’t ready for. Reaching for that kind of love would bring with it struggle, but in the end, it could be grander than her wildest imaginings.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tembi Locke, *From Scratch: A Memoir of Love, Sicily and Finding Home*, Simon & Schuster, 2019

**Grief and death go hand-in-hand.** We grieve when someone we're connected to dies. At some point in our life, all of us experience the loss of those closest to us. We lose those who brought us into the world. We lose aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, friends and, sadly, children. We come to know grief and sorrow when this happens.

**We know grief when we experience loss in other ways.** It may be the loss of a dream. It may be the loss of our forever home. It may be the loss of a job or career we loved. It may be the loss of our freedom, when we lose the ability to do things for ourselves. It may be the loss of our innocence about life in church. We grieve and feel sad when we experience these deaths as well.

**For me, the question** isn't "How do we avoid sorrow?" or "Why does God allow suffering?" The question is "What will you do when you're grieving and in pain?" The answer which comes to my mind is WWJD (what would Jesus do).

**Jesus doesn't show us the way in a calm, hillside setting** where everyone is fed, comfortable and there are lambs playing nearby. Jesus shows us the way in the harshest, most unjust and cruelest of moments. He shows us in the very moment before his death.

**We turn to Luke's narrative.** Jesus was betrayed, denied, falsely accused, illegally tried, tortured, mocked and convicted. He's led outside the city to the place where Roman soldiers publicly execute people, hanging them on a cross. There they hang, stripped, ridiculed and humiliated as they die, slowly and in agonizing pain. Jesus was no exception. This was his death. He knew it. There was no escaping it.

**Even so, Jesus didn't shout at them.** He didn't go on and on about how wrong this was. Jesus didn't retreat in his hurt and pain. No, he said, "*Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing*" (v?). The greatest injustice ever was happening to him, but Jesus wasn't focused on the hurt. His focus was on what was to follow. His first lesson: forgive those who hurt us, intentionally and unintentionally.

**There were others who didn't have Jesus' calm, his peace or sense of purpose.** That afternoon, two of them were there, crucified alongside him. Two thieves were crucified on that Friday so long ago.

**The two thieves weren't thinking "Why does God allow suffering?"**

But they were surely faced with the question "What will you do when you're grieving and in pain?" And their actions – what they thought and said, demonstrate the two paths we can follow.

**One of the criminals next to Jesus chose to insult him:** "*Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!*" He chose to follow the path of death, lost in grief. He couldn't see a way forward. To him, death was the end.

**The second criminal made a different choice.** He spoke harshly to first, "*We are rightly condemned, for we are receiving the sentence for what we did*" (v?). The second criminal reminded the first why they were there. They had harmed others, gotten caught and were paying for their crimes. According to the law of the time, their sentence was just. But knowing didn't reduce their pain and anguish at all. They were the death row inmates of their day, waiting for the end to come.

**This is when things turned in a new direction.** The second criminal chose a life-changing path. First, he said, "*this man has done nothing wrong*" (v?). He knew Jesus was innocent. How? We'll never know, but he then said something amazing, "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*" (v?).

**He believed in Jesus.** That's it. No frills, embellishments or gilding of the lily required. Such a simple way to express faith. It touches my heart. It shows us our attitude and intent matter more than our words. I think it's amazing because this person knew Jesus wouldn't save him from death on the cross. He didn't expect anything in return. He just wanted to tell Jesus something to lift his spirit in his final moments.

**We're like the two thieves.** We have the same choice when we're in the middle of our pain, filled with grief, facing death. We can join the mocking crowd and turn away, holding onto our death, hurt and injury. Or, we can take a chance. We can believe without expecting anything in return. We can find the courage to show love in the harshest moments of this life. We can let go of our hurts and pain and be set free.

**What Jesus said next turns the world upside down.** "*I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise*" (v?).

**God's promise is true.** Jesus' own words show us the depth of God's love, "*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life*" (John 3:16).

**These moments on the cross place us at the crossroads of life.**

We can embrace a God of sorrow, holding onto death and letting it have power over us and those in our household. Or we can embrace a God of love, who knows our sorrow, but who overcomes death. There is life after death and not just death of our physical body, but death after the loss of hopes, dreams and plans, or wellness.

**Jesus comes to us and shows us another way.** This is a new way, a new thing. And, when we choose to believe and follow, we become a new creation. God's love has the power to pardon and heal any wrong. God forgives us for our sins and welcomes us to table.

**All we need is the courage to be authentic,** living as Moses taught, "*Be strong and of good courage*" (Deuteronomy 31:6).

**Courage is often misunderstood as the capacity to suppress fear.**

Having courage means knowing what to fear. This requires the hard work of thoughtfulness and resolve. Courage isn't confrontational, pushing to win. Doing what is right because it aligns with God's love, rather than doing what we selfishly desire, is a courageous act.<sup>2</sup>

**This means loving God and loving others,** even when the peers of our group encourage us to separate and go our own way. This is particularly true for times when there is no clear answer in scripture or when our unity is in tension with our mission and purpose.

**This is the space we return to once again.** It's the space where we long for the love of God. It's where we discern the goodness of our desires. It's where we gather, hoping for a world as it ought to be. This is the place God yearns to meet us. It's a place of forgiveness and love, pardon and spiritual healing.

**God loves you.** I invite you to come and sit with us as we share our stories and encounter God's love once again. We're saving a space for you at the table.

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<sup>2</sup> Gil Rendle, *Be Strong and of Good Courage*, August 2016

**Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7, 9 (CEB)**

But here is my servant, the one I uphold;  
my chosen, who brings me delight.

I've put my spirit upon him;  
he will bring justice to the nations.

He won't cry out or shout aloud  
or make his voice heard in public.

He won't break a bruised reed;  
he won't extinguish a faint wick,  
but he will surely bring justice.

He won't be extinguished or broken  
until he has established justice in the land.

The coastlands await his teaching.

I, the Lord, have called you for a good reason.

I will grasp your hand and guard you,  
and give you as a covenant to the people,  
as a light to the nations,  
to open blind eyes, to lead the prisoners from prison,  
and those who sit in darkness from the dungeon.

The things announced in the past – look - they've already happened,  
but I'm declaring new things.

Before they even appear,  
I tell you about them.

**Luke 23:32-43 (CEB)**

They also led two other criminals to be executed with Jesus. When they arrived at the place called The Skull, they crucified him, along with the criminals, one on his right and the other on his left. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing.” They drew lots as a way of dividing up his clothing.

The people were standing around watching, but the leaders sneered at him, saying, “He saved others. Let him save himself if he really is the Christ sent from God, the chosen one.”

The soldiers also mocked him. They came up to him, offering him sour wine and saying, “If you really are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” Above his head was a notice of the formal charge against him. It read “This is the king of the Jews.”

One of the criminals hanging next to Jesus insulted him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”

Responding, the other criminal spoke harshly to him, “Don’t you fear God, seeing that you’ve also been sentenced to die? We are rightly condemned, for we are receiving the appropriate sentence for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Jesus replied, “I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.”