

## **Justice and Mercy**

By Sarah Miller Llana Christian Science Monitor Feb. 6/23

Luke 23:32-43 by Patty Friesen Palm Sunday, April 2/23

Today, Palm Sunday begins Holy Week in which we are led or sometimes dragged through the worst week of Jesus' life. Most years I'd like to go straight from Palm Sunday to Easter and avoid everything in between. It's a hard story - betrayal, loneliness, physical and emotional violence, grief and forgiveness. It's an awful story and sometimes we can't handle being dragged through it, yet in this tough story we sometimes find our own. Sometimes we need to hear about Jesus' pain to know we are not alone in ours. That's why I hope we try not to skip over Maundy Thursday Fasma and Communion and Good Friday Tenebrae Candle Darkening service. I'm glad I belong to a faith that doesn't try to avoid pain or death but leans into its hard reality and finds a way through to the other side.

Speaking of a hard reality and trying to find a way through - it's been five years since the Humboldt Broncos bus crash. Talk about a horror story of trauma and grief lived every day for those involved. Every April 6, Christina Haugen feels tugged toward the inexperienced semi driver, Jaskirat Singh Sidhu who on that day in 2018, drove through a blinking stop sign on Highway 35. Mr. Sidhu's moment of dangerous inattention killed 16 people on the Humboldt Broncos hockey team, including Christina's husband Darcy who coached the team. Last year, on the anniversary of the accident, Christina's thoughts kept returning to Mr. Sidhu, who was sentenced to eight years in prison and is now facing deportation to India.

“I was like, I bet you no one ever thinks about them,” Ms. Haugan said of her decision to send off an email to Mr. Sidhu’s wife. It was short - just to say she was thinking of them, she says. “As much as my life changed that day, so did his. I just think someone needs to kind of remember them on that day, because they’ll never be the same either.”

Her defining moment resonates for many as our nation asks itself whether it, too, can find mercy for Mr. Sidhu as he fights against deportation and for a chance to stay in Canada despite what he did.

The collective grieving over the Humboldt tragedy still occupies huge space in our thoughts. Many continue to blame the driver who caused it all. Others, including victims themselves, say Mr. Sidhu has served his time and that deportation is a double punishment, a law etched in a tough on crime era that is inconsistent with Canadian identity as a tolerant nation.

This week as the 5th anniversary of the catastrophic crash approaches, the notion of forgiveness - as Canada weighs whether it will find a place in society for Mr. Sidhu or send him to India remains a big question. Mr. Sidhu, who arrived in Canada in 2013, had gotten his commercial driving license to help put his wife, Ranvir Mann, through dental hygienist school and the crash happened during his first week driving alone. There is no question of fault and he has stood as a sympathetic character from the start. He pleaded guilty to all charges to avoid a trial and avoid more harm to the families. Families recall Mr. Sidhu’s clear remorse as he looked them straight in the eye when they read their victim impact statements. Ms. Haugan publicly forgave him at that hearing, though one father said, “You don’t deserve my forgiveness.”

Under criminal law, a person can't be punished twice. Deportation is legally classified as an administrative procedure. But in reality it is understood as punishment as a form of exile. Mr. Sidhu's lawyer says, I've been practicing law now for closer to 40 years and this is probably the most difficult case on many levels that I've had. I think forgiveness and second chances are a big part of our history and our culture. And I would like to see that reflected in this case.

Scott and Laurie Thomas lost their son Evan in the collision. Their home is a sanctuary to a child they remember as selfless with a sophisticated sense of humour. Scott's hugging encounter with a weeping Jaskirat in court, led to the Thomas' submitting a letter to help fight deportation. Mr. Thomas calls deportation "the easy way out" for the nation - its politicians and the trucking industry. In fact, he often imagines taking the stage with Mr. Sidhu - the two fighting together for safer roads and stricter rules for truck drivers.

The Thomases know they are on a journey different from that of many other angel families, as they call themselves. They can hardly explain it, except that they have a deep conviction that it is Evan himself guiding them, and that the freeing nature of forgiveness, for them, must mean they are on the right path, says Ms. Thomas. It's enabled them to put all of their energy into their son's legacy.

The subject of Mr. Sidhu is divisive in Humboldt so they don't talk about it and try to focus on healing instead. When the James Smith Cree Nation tragedy happened this summer, 75 miles north of Humboldt, two of the mothers who lost sons, quickly mobilized, delivering donated paper products, meats and vegetables out of people's gardens.

Broncos survivor Kaleb Dahlgren wrote the book *Crossroads: My Story of Tragedy and Resilience as a Humboldt Bronco*, carefully voices the subject of forgiveness because its too hard on some families. He says, “it took me awhile to accept and understand that nobody heals the same way and that’s OK - that’s completely OK to heal your own way and there’s no right or wrong way.”

The value of forgiveness is often considered crucial to moving forward - a belief as old as Jesus forgiving on the cross. But it can sometimes compound grief. “Not all the parents were against forgiveness. But not all the parents were on board either,” says the Reverend Joseph Salihu, the priest at St. Augustine’s in Humboldt. “And it was difficult for them. They were not prepared, and no one should place a value judgment on that. Forgiveness is only one of the ways we can deal with this lingering sense of injustice in this tragedy. Not everybody has to forgive - that takes a lot of the morality out of it.

Christina Haugan remembers feeling plenty of rage. Guided by faith, and by her sons whom she didn’t want burdened by anger, she committed to forgiveness. “It was like this huge weight was lifted off me, like I didn’t have to find a reason for the wreck, I didn’t have to find someone to blame.” At first, forgiveness was a daily choice: “For awhile, I had to kind of think about it consciously. And I had to say it every day: I’m not going to be angry. I’m not going to go down that road.”

Eventually she understood she wanted to distinguish between the commitment she made to forgive and putting it into action. That’s why she’s offered, in whatever way she can, to help Mr. Mann and Mr. Sidhu find a happy future - in Canada.

“It’s easy to say that you forgive him. But it’s maybe a little bit harder to actually, genuinely want good for him and want the best for him and to be able to live that out,” she says. “My personal opinion is that deporting them does no good. What purpose does it serve? We’re trying to live our lives the best we can. And that’s what I want for them, too.”

This Holy Week anniversary of tragedy and forgiveness, may we remember Jesus understood the shame of criminal punishment. Jesus also understood the power of forgiveness and offered it not only to the thief on the cross but to all of us. Holy Week this week is a slow and steady march to the cross. Because we know the end of the story, it can be tempting to skip to the good part. But let us instead be like the women at the foot of the cross who never leave Christ’s side. Let us accompany the One who accompanies us; the rejected One who understands what it feels like to be abandoned and exiled. And may we take a moment to learn from all those who rejected the Messiah? Who are we rejecting because they don’t fit our expectations or we don’t understand their choices.

Please pray with me this prayer from Kate Bowler...O God, open our hearts and minds and eyes and ears to hear what you have to teach us. On this Palm Sunday, time is marked as one small donkey plods toward Jerusalem. One with a face set like flint, feet almost grazing the ground, plods forward toward all sorrow – not in the power of horses and swift victory, but in small, steady steps, toward the mystery that through suffering, hearing comes, that through shame, dignity is restored, that through the cross, powers are disarmed and death done away with forever. Amen.