

There is so much devastating news right now. All week, I've found myself reading live reports coming out of Ukraine detailing the sheer horror of war. In his lies to justify war, Putin accused Ukraine's Jewish president of being a Nazi sympathizer. Earlier in the week, we heard about the state of Texas declaring that any gender affirming medical treatment for trans kids would be considered child abuse and parents should be prosecuted. Once again, a cis straight white man in power chose to use the most vulnerable people in our society, trans kids, as punching bags to score political points in the culture wars, a decision that literally puts those kids lives at greater risk.

It's hard to feel hopeful right now and it's hard to have any faith in humanity. There is enough pain – disease, natural disaster, and so forth – that we humans have no control over. But the news from this week is pain that humans caused. Humans choose war. Humans choose to hurt the most vulnerable. Humans choose to seek power regardless of who is hurt or killed in the process. Humans choose to lie and demonize. Humans choose to kill. On weeks like this, it's hard to find hope and it's hard to have much faith in humanity.

But there was another story this week about a man whose very life defies the despairing notion that we can't make a difference. This week, the world lost a saint. Dr. Paul Farmer, the founder of Partners in Health, died in his sleep. And while that was certainly sad and tragic news, Paul's life was anything, but. Boston was Paul's home when he was in the U.S., though, he would probably tell you he felt more at home in Haiti or Rwanda. His home truly was wherever he was most needed. As the founder of Partners in Health, Paul gave his life to trying to make sure the poorest people in the world had access to healthcare. It was his calling.

And he saw it as such. Paul was a Christian who was deeply influenced by liberation theology that proclaims that God has a preferential option for the poor. For Paul, the only way he knew to live out his theology was to try to make sure poor people had access to the same quality of healthcare as rich people.

I first read about Dr. Farmer in Tracy Kidder's book, *Mountains beyond Mountains* that is part biography of Farmer, part narrative about the work of Partners in Health, but maybe more than anything, is a book that tells such an inspiring story of one man trying, and succeeding, to change the world for the better.

There was one scene in the book that has impacted me and how I understand what it means to be a follower of Jesus more than just about anything I've ever read. One of Farmer's patients in Haiti was a boy names John who was very sick with cancer. The question for Paul and his team of doctors and nurses was whether or not John's cancer was treatable and they didn't have the medical equipment to run the necessary diagnostic tests in Haiti to find the answer to that question. So they had to decide whether to transport him to Boston for the test, which cost \$20,000, without knowing if they could actually heal him or not.

They decided to go ahead and the tests revealed that John had terminal cancer and there was nothing to be done. He died.

Some criticized Partners in Health and Farmer in particular for not using their money more wisely. Think about how much good could have been done with \$20,000 rather than using it to transport a boy when you didn't even know if the cancer could be cured or not, they said.

It sounds like a reasonable critique. Tracy Kidder, the author of the book, thought it was a reasonable critique, and he finally worked up his courage to ask Farmer about it and this is what Paul said:

“When you ask how much could have been done with twenty thousand dollars, you sound thoughtful, sensible, you know, reasonable, rational, someone you really want on your side. But do you ever notice how the argument for being rational with limited resources almost only applies only to the poor. In other words, it's not an honest question because you are already implying that we did not use that money well.

“But what if I asked that question differently. Is it an immoral use of resources that a corporate airline wouldn't transport a poor, dying boy for free while their executives get million dollar bonuses? Is that not an unreasonable use of resources? Or what if I were to point out that a young attending physician makes one hundred thousand dollars, not twenty, and that's five times what it cost to try to save a boy's life . . . Same world, same numbers, same figures, same currency. The only time that I hear talk of shrinking resources among people like us is when we talk about things that have to do with poor people.”

During the last month, we've had a sermon series called “The Way of Jesus” where we've explored what it means to follow Jesus and I can't help but wonder if many of the “experts” of Jesus' day offered the same critiques of him as were levied at Paul Farmer. So much of what Jesus said challenged the responsible, reasonable, sensible wisdom of the day and continues to do so in our day as well.

Blessed are the poor.

Woe to the rich.

Love your enemies.

Go, sell all your possessions and give your money to the poor.

And we could go on and on.

Our passage today is a turning point in the gospel of Luke. After Jesus comes down from the mountain, the gospel says he “set his face towards Jerusalem.” The next 10 chapters are his journey to Jerusalem where he will be arrested and killed. The story of the transfiguration is placed right before that journey to tell us who Jesus is and what it means to follow him. It's a

story about who we are called to trust and what it means to follow Jesus even when the things he asks of us go against conventional wisdom.

Jesus invited Peter, James, and John to go with him up the mountain and then something amazing happens. Jesus began to shine before them, bringing up imagery of Moses' face shining after communing with God on Mount Sinai. To make sure we get the point, the writer tells us that two heroes from Israel's past, Moses and Elijah, long since dead, suddenly appeared and stood there beside Jesus. Jesus stands in the tradition of the heroes of the faith that have come before him. But soon, we'll see that he also transcends that tradition also.

In seeing Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, Peter wants to worship. He wants to stay there. "Let me build three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah," he says. If Peter had his way, he would have stayed there on that mountain forever. He would have been able to sit at the feet of the greatest prophets of his faith. But God had other ideas, "This is my Son. Listen to him."

It's striking how the voice of God singles out Jesus even in the presence of Moses and Elijah, how Jesus transcends both of them. And that's profoundly important because it tells us that for those of us who are Christian, it is always Jesus who must be our ultimate revelation of God – not Moses, not Elijah, not the Church, not a pastor, not the Bible – but Jesus. And that's true when Jesus says the most comforting, beautiful words like:

"I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly."

"Come to me all who are weary and I will give you rest."

"Surely I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

But it's also true when Jesus says words that profoundly challenge us, words that call into question what we think we know about how things are supposed to work in the real world. When we truly listen to Jesus, then seemingly radical statements from someone like Paul Farmer who dares to ask why we question whether \$20,000 to try to save a child living in dire poverty is an irresponsible use of resources but some of the luxuries that I enjoy is not are actually not that radical anymore. In fact, when we choose to listen to Jesus, when we choose to let Jesus be our guide for who we are called to be, then Paul's words actually begin to make perfect sense.

Like Peter, I often would much rather build a shrine to Jesus than I would to actually listen to what Jesus says. I would rather simply worship him than to let his words form my worldview and determine how I try to live.

You see, I want to be successful. I want to be comfortable. I want to be like Farmer's critics and question whether spending so much money on one child was the best use of their resources

without having someone like Farmer also question my own choices about what I do with my resources.

But as much as I would like to be able to do that, I don't think that is an authentic way to listen to Jesus. To truly listen to him means that we follow him off the mountain, we pay special attention to those who are hurting, we consistently choose love over revenge, we forgive rather than hold grudges, we give of what we have rather than storing up more for ourselves, and we trust that, even when it seems to not make a whole lot of sense, that the way of Jesus, as challenging as it sometimes may be, is in fact the way of God.

And maybe more than anything, following in the way of Jesus challenges our sense of transaction. What I mean is that so often we think the world works in a transactional way – I do this and I will then get this, right? A lot of what passes for faith makes transactional promises. If we pray this much, God will give us this. If we follow God's commands, then we will be blessed. But we have to remember that after God told Peter, James, and John to listen to Jesus, they began their way back down the mountain and started the journey to Jerusalem where Jesus would be killed. Jesus wasn't going to win.

But the invitation that Jesus offers us is not to find better ways of living into a transactional world, more effective ways to win, but rather to change the categories that give life meaning altogether.

For Jesus, the only category that matters is love. Not, "Will it work?" Not, "Is it successful?" Not, "Is it the best use of resources?" But rather, "Is it an act of love to all, especially to those who are most hurting?" When we live out of the reality of love, we often don't win, we often don't achieve what the world may consider to be success. More often than not, we may feel like we're swimming upstream. This is what Paul Farmer called the long defeat.

After John's death, Paul reflected on how he understands his calling when so many people he tries to help end up dying. This is what he said:

"I have fought the long defeat and brought other people on to fight the long defeat, and I'm not going to stop because we keep losing. Now I actually think sometimes we may win. I don't dislike victory. ... You know, people from our background-like you, like most PIH-ers, like me-we're used to being on a victory team, and actually what we're really trying to do in PIH is to make common cause with the losers. Those are two very different things. We want to be on the winning team, but at the risk of turning our backs on the losers, no, it's not worth it. So you fight the long defeat."

This Wednesday, we will begin our Lenten journey as we reflect on our own mortality on Ash Wednesday. We will remember Jesus' journey over these next six weeks – his own long defeat – that ended with his death on the cross. But we will hear this story once again daring to believe that the cross is not the end of the story, daring to believe that the way of Jesus, the way of love is never really defeated because even when you kill it, love has the way of

resurrecting again and again and again. And on weeks like this when it's so hard to have any hope that love can win, that humans can be good, that sin and death and violence will not have the last word, it's so important to remember the great paradox of our faith.

Love always wins, even when it loses.

This week, I'm thankful that the way of Jesus that has been embodied by people like Paul Farmer whose life testifies to that great gospel paradox of hope and love even in the midst of defeat so that we too might cling to the shred of hope that we can live the long defeat also...no matter what is going on in the world around us.