

The Day That Changed The World: THE NEXT STEP TOWARD THE CROSS

Mark 15: 15-23

By his wounds we are healed.

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
March 17, 2024

The Passion of Jesus Christ is the world's most powerful story. But it is also our story, and we relate to it on many levels as we identify with the players in the drama. For me, studying the Passion again has brought back memories I had forgotten I even had.

In 1969, I was finishing the sixth grade. The elementary school I attended was only partially integrated. We had a few Black students, but not many. One of them was named Ernest. He had physical challenges; looking back I supposed it was a mild case of cerebral palsy. His speech was slurred. His muscular movements were jerky and uncoordinated. He was normal in his intelligence, but his handicaps put him in the special education classes. They also made him the object of ridicule and derision—what today we call “bullying.”

Ernest loved to play horseshoes, which was done at lunch or recess in an area beside the gymnasium at the school. He looked weird doing it, but he was actually pretty good. One day I walked out there at lunch to discover Ernest surrounded by a group of my friends. They were taunting Ernest, mocking him and mimicking his awkward movements.

Understand that this was the “in” group of guys—the jocks, the cool boys, the ones all the girls liked. I had spent years trying to be accepted by this group, because I wasn't that good-looking or athletic, and I felt like I was finally getting them to like me.

But something was just wrong about the way they were making fun of Ernest. I stood there and watched them for a minute, then I burst out, “I hope you're proud of yourselves!” And I stomped away, trying to shake the earth with each step.

Inside, though, I was cringing. “I hope you're proud of yourselves?” Really? Couldn't you think of something better than that? Now you've blown your friendship with the cool group, and you will be a nerd for the rest of your life.” I felt awful.

I avoided that group of guys for the next few days, and then the school year came to a close. On the last day of school, one of the cool boys stopped me. He was not the number one cool guy who had been making fun of Ernest, but he was like the number two cool

guy. He said, "I just want you to know that I thought what you did that day by the gym was brave. I appreciate what you said." As I walked home after my sixth grade year, I felt justified, vindicated, and cool.

This week when I read about the humiliation of Jesus, I thought about the humiliation of Ernest, though there really wasn't any comparison. Jesus was sent by Pilate to be flogged before crucifixion. This was no simple spanking. The Roman whips were designed to rip the flesh right off your back and induce maximum blood loss. Many criminals died from the flogging before they ever got to the crucifixion.

Then the soldiers made sport of Jesus, stripping him naked and putting a kingly robe on him, making a crown of thorns and pressing it down on his head, not so much as to inflict more pain, but because thorns were worthless. Jesus was a worthless king, wearing a crown of thorns. They slapped him and spit on him until they got bored and put the cross on his bloody back and sent him away to be crucified.

The mocking added insult to injury. And Jesus took it with courage and grace. He endured the pain and the humiliation, when he could have called down legions of angels and destroyed his tormentors. But why? Why?

In the torture and humiliation of our King Jesus, we see the human condition at its worst. There is something radically wrong with creation, within our own souls, that separates us from the goodness of God. Even the best of us is capable of horrific evil, and until we understand that about ourselves, we cannot appreciate what Jesus did for us. Until we appreciate what Jesus did for us, we cannot begin to respond with the goodness that also lies within us.

In his book *Vanishing Grace*, Philip Yancey shares a story about a World War II veteran who became a pastor. He had participated in the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp. Having already endured the horrors of war, the U.S. soldiers marched through the gates of Dachau. Nothing could have prepared them for what they found in the boxcars within the camp. Dead or dying people were stacked like firewood inside the boxcars. It was all very efficient and unimaginably horrible. The American soldiers began to unload the bodies so they could be identified and given a decent burial.

The pastor said every negative emotion covered him in waves—pity, shame, revulsion, and mostly rage, almost uncontrollable anger that anyone could do this to another human being. One of the soldiers named Chuck was assigned to escort twelve of the Nazi guards to an interrogation building. As soon as they got out of sight, several bursts of machine gun fire rang out. Chuck came strolling back into view and with a leer said "They all tried to run away."

When Philip Yancey asked if anyone reported what Chuck did or took disciplinary action, the pastor said, "No, and that's what got to me. It was on that day that I felt called by God to become a pastor. First, there was the horror of the corpses in the boxcar. I could not absorb such a scene. I did not even know such Absolute Evil existed. But when I saw it, I knew beyond doubt that I must spend my life serving whatever opposed such Evil—serving God. Then came the incident with Chuck. I had a nauseating fear that the captain might call on me to escort the next group of [Nazi] guards, and an even more dread fear that if he did, I might do the same as Chuck. The beast that was within those guards was also within me."¹

Nobody can be self-righteous. Given the right circumstance and opportunity, any one of us can turn into a monster. Every one of us is capable of evil. That's why we understand what is going on in the Passion.

But surely we would not have mocked Jesus, would we? We are good church people. There were lots of churches in Nazi Germany, too, and the majority of them were seduced by an ideology called Christian nationalism, an ideology that is still around and has made a resurgence in the last twenty years.

I've mentioned to you before a book entitled *unChristian* by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons.² In the last decade, the number of young adults who are not affiliated with any religion has doubled. According to their vast research, the reason young people are turning away from Christianity is because they perceive Christians as antihomosexual, judgmental, hypocritical, old-fashioned, too political, and insensitive, caring only about adding members and money to their churches. Many young adults believe that "modern-day Christianity no longer seems Christian."³ They like Jesus; they just don't like his church.

The defensiveness we feel at statements like that belies the truth they contain. We are mocking Jesus when we don't live by the spirit of his life and teaching. We try to claim his name without displaying his character. It's our human condition.

Acknowledging our human condition, we can appreciate what Jesus does for us. We need his mercy, his grace, his salvation. But how does this happen? How does his suffering 2,000 years ago help us today? How does his death on the cross reconcile us to God?

This is a deep theological idea known as *atonement*. Or as some prefer to call it, *at-one-ment*. Since the beginning of the Christian movement, people have tried to understand how the cross mediates our salvation. There are several theories, but I just want to touch on one today; it's called the "moral influence" theory. Basically, it says that the love and mercy and courage we see in Jesus Christ is enough to change our relationship to God. The love we see in Jesus is so radical that it effects a change in our hearts. We repent of our sin and turn to God because we are so affected by the sacrifice of Jesus.

That's not all the story, but it is part of it. We can't look on the broken, beaten, bloody body of our Lord without being changed, without becoming a different person.

Emmett Till was a 14-year-old African-American boy from Chicago who went to visit his relatives in Mississippi in 1955. On a dare, he whistled at the white woman behind the cash register at the store in the little Mississippi town. A few nights later, the woman's husband and another man took Emmett Till from his great-uncle's house. They took him to a barn, where they beat him, gouged out one of his eyes, and shot him in the head. Then they tied his body to a piece of farm equipment and dropped him in the Tallahatchie River. Three days later, the police found the body of Emmett Till. The only way his mother Mamie could identify him was by the ring she had given him, still on his finger.

When they held the funeral for Emmett Till in Chicago, Mamie insisted on an open casket, so the world could see what her son had suffered. Pictures of his body circulated in Black publications all over America and the world and are still on the internet. The effect for many people, both Black and white, seeing what had been done to Emmett Till, was to galvanize support for the civil rights movement in America. After Emmett Till, nothing had changed, but everything was different.⁴

After the death of Jesus Christ, nothing was changed. The human condition was still the human condition. But everything was different. There was a way opened up to God. There was forgiveness for sin and hope for eternal life. We had the possibility of change.

We can respond to our suffering the same way he did: confronting hatred with love, meeting violence with dignity and courage, living beyond this world with one foot in the Kingdom of God. We can live like Christ so the world can see who he truly is.

There is a tiny church in Topeka, Kansas, called Westboro Baptist Church. It is officially classified by the United States government as a hate group. Their influence is far greater than their membership because their mission is to spread hatred toward gay people, Jews, and people of color. They demonstrate publicly and up until laws were passed to prevent them, made it a practice to protest at the funerals of American soldiers, saying that God was killing our soldiers because America promotes homosexuality. Truly a disgusting group.

In 2012, Westboro Baptist Church announced they would picket at American University, a United-Methodist-affiliated school in Washington, D. C. The headline on their press release said, “WBC will picket the fag-infested, pervert-run American University.” Students and school organizations began to organize counter-protests, preparing for confrontation.

But a young woman in the United Methodist student ministry, Carly Jones, sent out a post on Facebook: “In light of recent news that WBC is coming to AU to picket next Friday, I would like to suggest that the UM Student Association use this event as an opportunity to display our love and inclusiveness to the campus community and to this hate group.” At the same time the Rev. Mark Schaefer, United Methodist campus minister at American University, was thinking about nonviolent alternatives like offering cookies and hot chocolate to all who gathered on that chilly afternoon.

Things got organized, and the night before the protest, the student ministry held a service of healing and reconciliation. Schaefer spoke of his feelings of anger toward Westboro Baptist Church and how they chose to portray Christianity, and he talked about how hard it was to meet hate with love. He said, “I spoke of how we get locked in cycles of hate and violence and are called to step out of that cycle and follow the Gospel, which is one of a radical, inclusive love that can change the world itself.”⁵

Four Westboro Baptist Church members came to the campus on January 14, 2012. They were met by over 1,000 American University students and members of the surrounding community. The United Methodist students handed out more than 500 cups of hot chocolate. Glued to the cups were Bible verses and statements about God’s love. That is not unchristian.

Last week, I quoted pastor Timothy Keller, “Here's the gospel: you're more sinful than you ever dared believe; you're more loved than you ever dared hope.”⁶ The torture and humiliation of Jesus Christ shows us two things: the radical sinfulness of the human condition, and the transformative power of sacrificial love. The sacrifice of Jesus can change a heart from hatred to love. The love of Jesus can heal the wounds of this world. Isaiah said, “By his wounds we are healed.”⁷ Feel the love; be changed; and be healed.

¹ Philip Yancey, *Vanishing Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 63.

² David Kinnamon and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What A New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity ... And Why It Matters* (Ada, MI: Baker Books, 2007), www.unchristian.com.

³ David Kinnamon and Gabe Lyons, “UnChristian: Change the Perception,” Fermi shorts, 2008. www.fermiproject.com

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emmett_Till.

⁵ *United Methodist Newscope*, February 8, 2012.

⁶ Tim Keller, “Treasure Versus Money,” *PreachingToday.com*.

⁷ Isaiah 53:5.