

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush, March 15, 2009
Mark 8:27-36
A Thorny Crown

Jesus is on his journey to the cross, heading to Jerusalem. In the village of Bethsaida, a blind man was brought to him for healing. Jesus laid hands on his eyes and the man said, "I see people, but they look like trees walking around." Jesus laid hands on his eyes a second time and now he saw everything clearly. The story is an example of what happens when we don't fully understand everything, when we only see part of the truth.

Next, Jesus entered the village of Caesarea Philippi. He asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" Peter boldly answered, "You are the Messiah." But when Jesus told them how the Messiah must endure suffering, abuse and death, Peter pulled him aside to rebuke him. Instead, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan." It's another example of partial sight and incomplete understanding on Peter's part.

In order to move his disciples from partial understanding to full understanding, Jesus talked to them quite plainly when he said, "If any want to become my followers, deny yourselves, take up your cross and follow me." It wasn't what they expected to hear, especially coming on the heels of Peter's incredible affirmation. Until now, they had seen Jesus perform wonders – cast out demons, do miraculous healings, multiply the fish and loaves to feed a multitude. Until now, though, they had only called him "Teacher", "Rabbi." But Peter changed all that when he looked Jesus in the eyes and said, "You are the Anointed One, the Messiah" – a title which Jesus did not deny. A title that referred to One anointed by God who would chase out the Romans and re-establish the kingdom last seen when David sat on the throne.

But what did Jesus do next? Just when Peter and the others thought they saw everything clearly, Jesus told them about a suffering Messiah, a mocked, beaten, and crucified Savior. Peter was shocked. Who would want to follow someone like that? Who wanted to hear a message that "those who wish to save their life will lose it"?

Let's consider that question in light of the symbol guiding our worship today, namely, the crown of thorns. When Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified, three of the four gospels describe how some thorn vines were twisted into a crown and placed on Jesus' head. The Christian church has made a lot out of this detail, with artists depicting Jesus' forehead bloody and pierced by a wreath of thorns. But the gospel writers don't tell us this detail to emphasize how painful Jesus' suffering was; the act of crucifixion was horrific enough for that purpose. No, the crown of thorns was part of how Jesus was mocked by others, such as when the soldiers put a purple cloak on him and bowed down as if he was truly a king. They laughed and mocked this Nazarene who'd been charged as being the King of the Jews.

Sadly, mocking the righteous has a long, storied history. Think of the British soldiers who beat the followers of Mahatma Gandhi as they protested for peaceful change in India. Think of John Lewis and the others mocked and burnt with lit cigarettes when

they tried to integrate the lunch counters of Nashville. Think of the death threats Martin Luther King, Jr. received, or the abuse heaped upon Rosa Parks when she refused to surrender her seat on the bus.

To endure such mockery while in the right is, in the words of Christ, to deny oneself and take up a cross. It means acknowledging that being right doesn't shield you from harm or public mockery. Even harder, to deny oneself and take up a cross means we are to surrender a vision of white privilege and of social superiority in order to kneel beside someone in trouble, or offer self-giving love at the cost of personal sacrifice. As one person put it, it means we let our self shrink so that our soul can stretch.

Preacher Sally Brown, though, reminds us that this topic about denying ourselves and taking up our cross is a delicate subject. It is neither a crown of thorns nor bearing a cross to have to endure abuse or domestic violence. There is nothing Christ-like about being beaten, especially if you've been wrongly told to stick it out for the sake of the marriage or to keep a family secret. In this world there is blind anger and violence, and it must be challenged in every form. Suffering for sufferings' sake is never part of God's will for your life. No, the self that is to be denied is the self that seeks to control and dominate others, the self that would advance its own interests at the expense of others.

A TIME magazine article described how John Hollett, double recipient of the Silver Star, was killed in 1970 and buried in Westpoint Cemetery. Before dying in battle, he had written his own obituary and sealed it in an envelope for his wife. He wrote, "I deny that I died for anything – not my country, not my Army, not my fellowman. I lived for these things, and the manner in which I chose to do it involved the very real chance that I would die. I accepted this possibility as part of a price which must be paid for things of great value."¹

A thorny crown of mockery and a wooden cross of crucifixion are set before us as we hear Jesus say, "Come, follow me." What is it that Christ offers us when we take him at his words and follow him, despite the cost and suffering? Some suggest that by following Jesus, we share in his victory over demonic powers and the darkness of death (Christus Victor atonement theory). By following Jesus, we creatures of sin under the judgment of a just God finally experience the grace of forgiveness and reconciliation (satisfaction theory of atonement).² Or by following Jesus, we who have been unloved and rejected now discover a path that leads to wholeness, recovery and new life (moral influence theory of atonement). All three of these beliefs are right. Atonement won by the cross of Christ means we are freed from any lasting power of evil or death, washed clean of any lasting stain of sin, and lifted up to be voices for truth and justice in a morally confused world.

I hope you heard that last sentence, because I don't want this idea to get lost in all my fancy pulpit vocabulary. I want to make it plain, as my Baptist preaching colleagues say. The failure of the modern world is that it can offer us no ultimate redemption. It can offer us lots of doo-dads and electronic distractions, but nothing that can ultimately save us or give us a real foundation for our lives. Capitalism and consumerism can't do it.

Politics and patriotism can't do it. Wealth-for-wealth's-sake, or family-for-family's-sake, or even church-for-church's-sake can't do it either. The cross of Jesus Christ is how God comes to us in our sin and godforsakenness, into our lives of negation, darkness and failure, and refuses to let all that be the final word.

At yesterday's disappointing Presbytery meeting, one of the saddest moments came when a sincere father stood up and told how he was sure that scripture claimed all homosexuality was a sin. Then he said that he had a son who had died of AIDS, and that the child was outside God's grace. And when this father would die, he was sure he would see his wife, who'd preceded him in death, and join up with others in his family who'd died of illness and tragedy. But he believed he wouldn't see his son even though he misses him. The room heard this in silence. And in my heart and, I hope, in many others, was the unspoken prayer, "Lord, set this man free from his prison cell of pious certainty so that your grace might show him a heaven where fathers and AIDS-ravaged sons are reunited."

Jesus was asked, "Are you a king?", to which he replied, "You say so" (Mk 15:2). So they mocked him by putting a crown of thorns on his head. To be a follower of Christ is neither cozy nor safe. It can involve having to wear false crowns and enduring mockery and abuse: Having to wear a thorny crown wrapped in pages from the bible, as people laugh at our insistence that the gospel truth is neither wishful thinking nor ignorant spirituality. Having to wear a thorny crown of rainbow scarves in a culture quick to condemn the array of sexual gifts God has ordained for humankind. Mocked and forced to wear a thorny crown of pamphlets for 12-Step programs when we commit ourselves to break cycles of addiction. Mocked and forced to wear a thorny crown of school transcripts recalling how our President has said to drop out of school is to dishonor yourself and dishonor your country. Mocked and forced to wear a thorny crown of research articles about the environmental havoc we are wreaking on God's good earth. Mocked and forced to wear a thorny crown woven with journals from single mothers' diaries and uninsured fathers' medical records trying to survive in a heartless land.

A blind man saw, after Jesus touched his eyes, but at first he saw only partially. Peter announced Jesus to be the Messiah, but his partial understanding led him to rebuke Christ once Jesus spoke about having to suffer and die. Rulers and soldiers laughed at Christ, thrusting a false crown on his head and mocking this "King of the Jews." Now is the time to put aside partial things and to seek the full truth – the way of redemption. Christ is the one we are to follow. Christ, who died for us, was raised for us, and who intercedes for us, is the one we are to follow. For what does it profit us to gain the whole world and yet lose our life?

AMEN

¹ Jamie Melanowski, *TIME*, November 11, 1997, p. 4.

² Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, pp. 248-9.