

Lectionary B October 18, 2015 Pentecost 21
Grace and Peace Lutheran Church Evansville, IN
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Isaiah 53:4-12
Psalm 91:9-16
Hebrews 5:1-10
Mark 10:35-45

The Ugliest Most Beautiful Truth

I can just see Jesus shaking his head and doing one of those things with the palm of his hand on his forehead. What in the world can he do to make these twelve men understand?

It will help us to understand Jesus' dilemma if we back up just a couple verses. Just before this request from the Zebedee brothers Jesus had poured his heart out to the disciples. For the third time he told them about his arrest, his death, and his resurrection. He told them he was headed for some hard times. He was going to suffer at the hands of the temple leaders. They were going to kill him. Here are Jesus' exact words, "... *the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.*"

And immediately after he told them all about this, here comes James and John with their ridiculous question about what he could do for them! It is like they skipped over the gory stuff about Jesus being mocked, spit upon, flogged and killed. Now they want two sit in royal seats next to Jesus in paradise. And the other ten weren't any better, really. The Message Bible says, "*When the other ten heard of this conversation, they lost their tempers with James and John. Jesus got them together to settle things down.*"

You see this is the third time we read in Mark that Jesus tried to spell out in terms they could understand about his suffering and death. In chapter 8 Peter argued that none of that would happen. He, Peter, just plain wouldn't let it. That is what provoked Jesus' response, "Get behind me, Satan." And in chapter 9, much like the incident we read today, when Jesus tried to tell them he was going to suffer and die, they started fighting about who was his favorite!

Now, before we get all righteous about this and judge the disciples, let's think about it for a minute. I don't think we are much better than Jesus' chosen twelve. What Jesus told them was too much to take in. Its reality was too scary and ugly.

I remember when I was 29 my mother had been diagnosed with cancer. She was taken to Indianapolis for surgery. The surgeon came back too early with news none of us could bear. The cancer was everywhere and they just closed her back up. There was nothing that could be done. Then the chaplain came in. I have to admit I wasn't very nice to this poor guy. I know he was trying to make us feel better, find some way to give us hope but he only made me mad. "This will bring your family closer together." That was the hope he gave. "We are close already,

thank you. We sure don't need my mom to die to bring us close together." That is pretty much what I told him. I didn't want any consoling... What I really wanted to do is ignore the facts and pretend it didn't happen. Like James and John I would have loved changing the subject. The reality was too scary and ugly

But this is Jesus we are dealing with. He's turning everyone's world upside down. The sheer terror he is describing is really the most beautiful truth. Our Isaiah text, popularly known as the story of the "suffering servant" says, "*But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.*"

The cross has become a symbol of hope and promise to us. Through Jesus' love and sacrificial service to God, Jesus has turned an ugly object of torture into the most beautiful symbol of hope we have. When you think about it, wearing a cross could be the same as wearing a gallows, or a guillotine, or an electric chair. Downright ugly, right? Who in their right mind would wear something so repulsive?

But here's the difference. Jesus' love for all of us sinners is what changed the cross into a symbol of hope. Because of Jesus' suffering and death, when I got the news about my mom I could yell and scream and cry my heart out at the foot of Jesus cross. Then I could feel hope for my mother and for myself.

In our Hebrews text we read, "*Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him...*" Jesus conquered death and its ugliness on that cross. That's the absolutely most beautiful truth there is.

So that is the truth Jesus is trying to help those arguing disciples to see. They don't have to be afraid they aren't good enough. Because of Jesus' love, they don't have to fight about who is the best, or strongest, or whatever the "est" is. It doesn't matter, because Jesus' love has changed the game. Here's how he explains it to them.

"You've observed how godless rulers throw their weight around," he said, "and when people get a little power how quickly it goes to their heads. It's not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave. That is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not to be served—and then to give away his life in exchange for many who are held hostage."

Worldly fame and honor doesn't amount to a hill of beans. What makes us great is knowing we are God's heirs. And what do God's heirs do?

God's heirs understand this. * In Mother Teresa's words, "*Let us not love by words alone, but let us love until it hurts.*"

God's heirs bend down and serve each other. They reach out to God's hurting children, those who are mistreated and judged unworthy by the world. God's heirs embrace those who are repulsive to the world. They eat with the homeless. They visit with prisoners. They embrace

those who are bullied or shunned because they are different, whether it be their skin color, their sexual orientation, their religion, or any other reason people pick to judge others.

When Josephine Bakhita (1869-1947) was nine years old, Arab slave traders kidnapped her from her village in the Darfur region of Sudan. Josephine eventually became a Roman Catholic nun and was canonized in 2000. Describing one scene of many horrors of her life as a slave, Josephine Bakhita writes,

One day I unwittingly made a mistake that incensed the master's son. He became furious, snatched me violently from my hiding place, and began to strike me ferociously with the lash and his feet... A woman skilled in ... [tattooing] came...our mistress stood behind us, whip in hand. The woman had a dish of white flour, a dish of salt and a razor... When she had made her patterns; the woman took the razor and made incisions along the lines. Salt was poured into each of the wounds... My face was spared, but 6 patterns were designed on my breasts, and 60 more on my belly and arms. I thought I would die, especially when salt was poured in the wounds...it was by a miracle of God I didn't die. God had destined me for better things.

If I were to meet the slave-traders who kidnapped me and even those who tortured me, I would kneel and kiss their hands, for if that did not happen, I would not be a Christian and Religious today... The Lord has loved me so much: we must love everyone... we must be compassionate!

Josephine Bakhita understood what being a suffering servant was at its ugliest. But Jesus' love for her turned it into something absolutely beautiful.

So what does all this have to do with us? It is really very simple. Jesus's ugly death on the cross cut our chains of slavery to the world and all its false hope, like fame and power and owning things, and popularity. Jesus resurrection covered us with a power so great that nothing can get between us and God's love.

The other day some of us were talking about what our welcoming statement really means to us. One person asked, "So what if someone walked into those doors on Sunday morning stark naked? Would we welcome them? Well, we'd be surprised, but I hope we would recognize that this person needed help. I hope instead of judgment, this person would receive compassion. We'd get that person what they needed—we'd start with a blanket, or clothing, but then we'd see what other help was needed.

Since we are free from all the lies society tells us, we can serve others without fearing for our reputation or our lives. We can give in ways society sees as foolish. We can walk beside those who need us the most. We can feel their pain. We can cry with them and love them and help them from the pain of our own bleeding wounds. When we serve each other we experience Jesus' resurrection ourselves.

Jesus said, "...whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

And that truth is just plain beautiful. Amen

