

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Maundy Thursday Communion Service, April 5, 2012

REFLECTIONS ON MARK 14 AND 15

Mark 14:1-2

It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; for they said, “Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.”

This is a night of plotting and intrigue, a night of treacherous deeds done clumsily in the dark, a night of cowardice and lies, a night of chaos and shame. Who is responsible for the execution of Jesus? People have said blame should be laid upon the Jews or the Romans or perhaps spiritually upon the brutal and treacherous in every age or upon some unpopular minority viewed as immoral, but Christian faith’s best answer echoes through our hymn, “Ah, Holy Jesus,” which helps us toward the painful realization:

‘Twas I, Lord Jesus,
I it was denied You;
I crucified You.

Prayer: Eternal God, tonight we stand confronted by the mystery of your redemptive love: that you should make yourself vulnerable to us through your Son. We live in a world of great atrocities and of petty, everyday cruelties. We confess that it is our estrangement from you that isolates us in our separate selves and keeps us estranged from each other. Be with us now, and bring us together at the cross. Enter our solitary confinement in self, and lead us out into freedom that we can share. Help us know in Jesus’ self-giving love the truth that sets us and all people free. Amen.

Hymn No. 93 (verse 1) “Ah, Holy Jesus”

Mark 14:10-12

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray Jesus to them. When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So Judas began to look for an opportunity to betray him. On the first

day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, Jesus' disciples said to him, "Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?"

People have long speculated about the motives or urgencies driving Judas to betray his teacher and friend. The truth remains that we don't know why he did it. Jesus was betrayed for no apparent reason by one of those closest to him. What shame or disappointment, what fear, ambition, or bitterness of the soul, urged Judas to sell Jesus out to his enemies for almost nothing, we cannot say. The Bible tells us only that he did it.

It was the first day of Passover, which begins at sundown as does every day on the ancient Jewish calendar which is lunar rather than solar. So, for Jesus, what we call Maundy or Holy Thursday and what we call Good Friday were, in fact, only one day from sundown when he and his disciples began the Passover supper to the next sundown when his dead body had just been taken down from the cross with no time left for the women to prepare it properly for burial. It is this one long, terrible day we remember in this Communion service.

Passover is the Jewish celebration of freedom by the grace of God who had sent Moses to lead the Hebrew slaves out of their misery and despair, up from the dehumanization of their servitude. Jesus came to deliver us from all forms of dehumanization that destroy the body and spirit of the individual and corrupt the human community. God created life to be relational. Each person is one of us in life because each belongs with us to God, and we need each other in order to be human. God made us to be loved and to respond with love, respect, and compassion for each other. What was done to Jesus over the course of this one long day represents the betrayal of God's love for all people and the dehumanization many suffer every day in our world. In what was done to him, Jesus takes to himself what is done to us in life and what we do to people when we violate the image of God in them. Jesus suffered with us as well as for us. In him, God bore the shame of becoming the dehumanized person, the one counted for nothing, the one treated as worthless.

Prayer: Holy God, how did your Son come to be so betrayed and rejected? How could you enter so personally into the misery and humiliation suffered by so many in our brutal world? What immeasurable love is this that confronts us tonight? May we never again see a person shamed, brutalized, or disregarded without recognizing the image of Jesus in that person and the reflection of his suffering. Open our minds and hearts to the awful truth that what we do without caring to even the least respected of people, we do without caring to him. Please don't let us live without caring. Amen.

Hymn No. 93 (verse 2) "Ah, Holy Jesus"

Mark 14:32-36

They went to a place called Gethsemane; and Jesus said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.” And going a little farther, Jesus threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.”

Yes, it's true that I have made faith decisions in my life, accepting as the truth for me the gospel of Jesus Christ, choosing to try to follow him and live my life his way, but all my choices pale in the light of the choice he made in Gethsemane. I did not choose Jesus to be my Savior, my Redeemer, my Teacher and Lord. He chose me, and gave himself to become my Savior in his death. He made the decision for my salvation, and he alone did what had to be done for him to become for me the living, dying, and rising truth of God's redemptive love. Whenever I hear people ask anyone, “When were you saved?” I think of Gethsemane. Whenever someone asks, “When did you accept Jesus Christ?” what echoes in my mind is his fateful prayer to his Abba, his Father, “yet, not what I want, but you want.”

Jesus' faithfulness is far greater than my faith. It is his choice that matters, his decision that effects my salvation, his acceptance of me that gives me life and hope. No, it's not just about me, not at all. I am one among a great many, all loved and claimed in love by God, and we need each other if we are to realize in life what salvation truly is all about. Just as our life as created beings is made to be relational and lived in community, so our salvation is relational, also. I cannot be human before God without the human community. My salvation and yours are not two separate issues but are bound together in the love of God for all and each.

My choices matter to the health and wholeness of the person I am becoming because Jesus keeps calling me to follow him, but his choice is the one which makes me that person. God works through my decisions and responses to heal me and teach me to be of service in the human community, but Jesus' decision is the one that makes my choices matter.

No, I did not accept Jesus as my Savior; he accepted me, and he has made me one of many sisters and brothers. The horror of his prayer in Gethsemane is deeply troubling to me, but I believe that is as it should be, because so much that we do and have done to us is far more deeply troubling to God. We needed Jesus to be the true human being *for us* as well as *with us*. He is the one who gave himself so we may be brought to life with him. We have hope because he has accepted us and made the choice for our salvation.

Prayer: Your will be done, O God, for your will is life, hope, healing, forgiveness, and love. But your will is something we continue to resist because we ourselves are willful creatures who want our way, each of us. Help us think about Jesus in Gethsemane – about what he faced and why he chose to go forward into such a nightmare of pain and humiliation. God, we can make even faith a matter of pride in ourselves and scorn for others. Please forgive us and stay with us. Amen.

Choir Anthem: “The Garden”

Mark 15:16-20

Then the soldiers led Jesus into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. And they began saluting him, “Hail, King of the Jews!” They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

The Romans reserved crucifixion for those victims they wished to humiliate utterly and reduce to objects of disgust and shame in the eyes of any who might even consider rebelling against the empire. “Romans always win” was the boast that gave them the proud desire to show so horribly that no one could stand up to Rome, that Roman rule was the truth of life before which all had to bow down.

Jesus was mocked, but the taunts were only one aspect of the full program for reducing a person to helplessness and despair from which he was expected to cry out, cursing his tormentors and begging for death to be his deliverer, his savior. That’s what crucified people did. Crucifixion was a public event, a display of Roman power to reduce rebels to nothing. Jesus was put on display as a thing of shame, a fool who had supposedly dared stand up to Rome. The idea was not only to break him but to display him as a man broken so that no one standing by would ever dream again of resistance or rebellion.

This is the way the powerful treat people they regard as inferior who dare challenge their superiority. This is the way people who worship power believe God should be, but God is not. God is not standing above the Roman eagle overseeing the right of dominion. God is with that man being spit on, beaten, and mocked. It has not changed. God is with the wage slave whose feet and back ache from repetitious labor. God is with the people who have been put out of work – “nothing personal” – to increase profits for shareholders. Jesus was

mocked. He knows how it feels to be made helpless and abused for the amusement and pride of those exercising their power.

Prayer: Merciful God, this world is cruel to people who become vulnerable. You created us with the strength to be caring, but we turn that strength to dominion and many forms of bullying. We human beings are bullies when we get the chance. We seize the advantage and take satisfaction from putting others down. We love to be higher up the ladder, to be in control, to have people look up to us and give us what we wrongly call respect. God, you who have no equals, have made yourself vulnerable to us in the very person of the Son you love. That your Son should come to serve and give himself for us is a mystery, a wonder, that turns our world upside down. Help us begin to see Jesus in the person we might think to put down, to mock or scorn, to shame and dehumanize. Amen.

Hymn No. 93 (verse 3) “Ah, Holy Jesus”

Mark 15:25,33-39

It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him.

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

Our prayer now will be the first two and the fourth verses of Carolyn Gillette's hymn, "A Prayer for Our Children." Jesus died in union with all who feel abandoned, especially by God. He cried out with all who feel themselves to be God-forsaken.

After our prayer-hymn, we will go to the Lord's table to share the bread and cup of his utter faithfulness to God's self-giving love for us.

Hymn (on insert) “A Prayer for Our Children” (verses 1,2,4)