

Fifth Station of the Cross
“Jesus Is Mocked”
Matthew 27:27-31
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It’s hard to deny that America has become a nation of voyeurs. It seems we possess an endless appetite for reality television, especially when it involves human interest stories and their tragedies whether it’s Britney Spears or Tiger Woods or the strained relationship between Prince Harry and the rest of the British royal family which we’ll hear more about tonight in a special prime-time interview conducted by Oprah Winfrey. Psychologists say that like moths to a flame, we find ourselves attracted to such shows because they remind us that as bad as our OWN lives may sometimes feel, we can take heart in knowing that there are always OTHERS much worse off. As awful as it sounds, the bottom line is that we tend to derive a sense of deep satisfaction and EVEN SUPERIORITY from the misery of others- what the Germans like to call “schadenfreude.”

Today’s reality shows can trace their origins back to a particular program I grew up watching as a kid. Long before Jerry Springer became a household name, ten million persons a day, five days a week, tuned in to hear the voice of Jack Baily bellow, “How would YOU like to be QUEEN for a DAY!” to which the audience would reply en masse, “YES!” It was a show where people with tragic stories competed against one another with their tales of woe. Four contestants were chosen from a studio audience of about eight hundred based on their responses on “wish cards.” Then whoever the audience deemed had the WORST life was crowned “Queen for a Day” and received some kind of small prize. It began in 1947, first on radio and then on television where it remained until going off the air in 1964.

In the early years of the show, the women’s wishes were often whimsical or fun- they wanted to meet Errol Flynn or sleep on the top of the Empire State Building or ride a camel down Fifth Avenue. But gradually, hard-luck stories began to win out over the light-hearted ones. Contestants started wishing for things like dentures and hearing aids and prosthetic limbs for family members. As the queen was chosen by audience response, the trick was to tug on as many heartstrings as possible without breaking down and blubbering, which Mr. Bailey strongly discouraged. The show thus became a competition of who had it worse. A woman who wanted a special bed for her brother, who had been shot five times in the back, beat out a woman whose five-year-old son had a brain tumor and wanted educational toys and a collie for him. One woman wanted a vacation because her two disabled children had died, then her father and mother died, and a month later her husband. And she didn’t even win. She was defeated by a woman who wanted a wheelchair for her son who had cerebral palsy.

No attempts were made to check out the contestants’ stories, even if they won the crown. The winners were crowned with a tiara, wrapped in a red velvet robe, and then showered with merchandise, mostly appliances, furniture, clothes and the occasional vacation. The next day,

they were squired around Hollywood in a chauffeur-driven, gold Chrysler Imperial. The losers would receive gifts too: an electric hair dryer, electric toothbrushes for the family, a carpet-shampooing set, a set of plastic kitchenware, and a ham. Church, you can't make this stuff up. If ever the bar had been set for the height of absurdity and bad taste, this show was it. To think that people actually competed against one another with their tales of sorrow and woe in order to win a fake title and a toaster oven. Did the regal majesty of a crown and sceptre and robe ever ring more hollow and look more pathetic on someone?

Well perhaps it DID. Two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ vied for the title of "KING for a day" and may have won. After all, who had a more hard-luck story than HIM? After failing to save Jesus from the hands of his detractors, Pilate had him handed over to the soldiers to receive due punishment. First, he was scourged by Roman soldiers. Stripped and stretched against a low post, his hands tied so that he had no means to defend himself, Jesus was flogged mercilessly with a cat-o'-nine-tails. Bits of iron and bone attached to the ends of the thongs ensured that his back would look like chopped meat after it was over.

Following the scourging, he was led away to the soldiers' quarters to be made sport of. There, they conducted a mock coronation where they pretended he was their king. Getting hold of an old cast-off cloak, they threw it over his shoulders to serve as his royal robe. Then one of them ran out and pulled a few twigs from a thorny bush and fashioned a crude crown out of them. This was then crushed down upon his head, the thorns piercing the sides of his temple. To complete the outfit, he needed a sceptre so another soldier found a reed and thrust it into his right hand. Thus the mock king was now dressed for the part. To further humiliate him, his "loyal subjects" began getting down on one knee and proclaiming "Hail, Jesus, the King of the Jews." Then each, with a burst of laughter, struck him with blows from their hands and spat upon him so that their spittle ran down his face and beard. In what was a display of the basest passions of the human heart, the soldiers continued to derive great fun from such abuse.

In 1973, Dr. Philip Zimbardo of Stanford University carried out a classic but highly controversial experiment to investigate the psychological effects of imprisonment. An ad asking for volunteers to take part in a study of prison life was placed in a newspaper. Those who responded were given clinical interviews and twenty-five PHYSICALLY HEALTHY AND EMOTIONALLY STABLE young men were selected.

The participants were randomly designated as either "prisoners" or "prison guards." Those assigned in the role of "prisoners" were "arrested" by Palo Alto police officers who charged them with a crime, read them their rights, searched them and took them in a squad car to the police station to be fingerprinted. The "prisoners" were then blindfolded and taken to a basement at Stanford University which had been converted into a mock prison where they were stripped, searched, and deloused. There they were issued bedding and uniforms consisting of loose-fitting smocks with identification numbers printed on the front and back while chains were bolted around their ankles. The "guards" were given military khaki-style uniforms, whistles, handcuffs and clubs. They were also issued silver reflective sunglasses (which made any eye contact between them and the "prisoners" impossible) and given keys to the cells in this mock prison.

All the participants took to their roles very quickly. The “guards” quickly established a routine of eight-hour shifts, and only allowed the “prisoners” out of their cells for meals. They began acting in an authoritarian and abusive manner towards the “prisoners” and many seemed to relish the power they were given. When they started getting bored, they played games which involved humiliating the “prisoners.” Within thirty-six hours, one of the “prisoners” began suffering from severe depression while another was released after starting to cry uncontrollably and having fits of rage. During the next few days, three other “prisoners” began acting in a similar way and they too were withdrawn from the experiment. All the participants in Dr. Zimbardo’s study had previously agreed to and signed a formal “informed consent” statement which stated that they would lose some of their civil rights and experience an invasion of privacy and harassment. However, he had not anticipated the extent to which his “guards” would brutalize the “prisoners,” and although the experiment was planned to last two weeks, it was abandoned after just six days.

In an editorial in the Boston Globe, Dr. Zimbardo discussed the parallels between his experiment almost five decades ago, and the more recent abuse by U.S. officials of Iraqis at Abu Ghraib:

The terrible things my guards did to their prisoners were comparable to the horrors inflicted on the Iraqi detainees. My guards repeatedly stripped their prisoners naked, hooded them, chained them, denied them food or bedding privileges, put them into solitary confinement, and made them clean toilet bowls with their bare hands. As the boredom of their job increased, they began using the prisoners as their playthings, devising ever more humiliating and degrading games for them to play. Over time, these amusements took a sexual turn, such as having the prisoners simulate sexual acts on each other. Once aware of such deviant behavior, I closed down the Stanford prison.

In 1997, there was one criminal case that dominated New York headlines more than any other for close to a year. It involved a Haitian immigrant named Abner Louima who was repeatedly assaulted and brutalized by New York City police officers after being mistakenly arrested outside a Brooklyn nightclub. Once taken to the police station, he was beaten senselessly and then sexually assaulted in ways that I dare not even BEGIN to describe from this pulpit. His injuries were SO great that he was hospitalized for more than two months afterwards. A trial ensued and a number of those officers were convicted and sentenced to lengthy prison terms. The civil suit that ensued resulted in the city paying him almost nine million dollars to settle the largest police brutality settlement in New York City history.

Well what do those Roman soldiers who beat and humiliated our Lord two thousand years ago share in common with Dr. Zimbardo’s experiment where average persons role-played prisoners and prison guards, and the Abner Louima case from a quarter of a century ago? To begin with, it clearly shows how throughout history, human nature has not changed one iota, that just as people were cruel and abusive to Jesus Christ two millennia ago, people can be just as cruel and abusive to their own brethren TODAY- ESPECIALLY when they are in a superior relationship to them. It seems incomprehensible how persons can gloat over the sufferings of a fellow-creature, how they can turn their victim’s pain and shame into brutal mockery, and yet the

instinct to exult at the downfall of another and transform into monsters in the process is universal. The scriptures declare that “the heart is deceitfully wicked above all things. Who can know it?” and when you look back over human history, you find that assertion almost impossible to disprove. In fact, you don’t have to go back seventy-five years to the barbarities of World War II and the Jewish Holocaust for some glaring examples but only as recently as the 1990's where we witnessed the genocidal madness of the Hutus against the Tutsis in Rwanda; the Serbs, Bosnians, and Croats at war with each other in the old Yugoslav republic, and Sunnis killing Shiites killing Kurds in Iraq’s recent history. In each of these, you had neighbors, who for years had peacefully lived alongside each other, all of a sudden forget their mutual friendship and rise up against the other in murderous hatred. Just look at the riot on January 6th when the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. was stormed and the mob scoured the halls seeking the former Vice-President and current Speaker to hang them for merely doing their duty!

And not only is the level of aggression swift and deep, but we’re talking about persons who lived very CONVENTIONAL LIVES- persons who were ordinary individuals with good families and lots of friends and strong connections in the community. Those Romans who beat our Lord were not sociopaths but REGULAR CITIZENS who by virtue of their years on the battlefield had gradually become calloused to human suffering. Similarly, Dr. Zimbardo stated that only healthy and emotionally balanced young men were selected for his Stanford experiment; the American soldiers at Abu Ghraib all came from stable, loving homes; and in the case of Abner Louima, those cops who were convicted were all good family men, MANY OF WHOM ATTENDED CHURCH REGULARLY. And yet, as we’ve seen, it doesn’t take much for the dregs of the dregs of human nature to all of a sudden rise up and dominate one’s life.

Several years ago, *Scientific American Magazine* reported a survey study in which students were asked to rate their own capacity for “empathy”- empathy being the ability to experience and respond to another person’s feelings, WITHOUT WHICH, love becomes a mere pretense, an empty gesture. It is to put ourselves in the shoes of another individual and to see things through his or her eyes that we might more fully understand the meaning and significance of what it is they are experiencing. The responses from those students were quite revealing. It showed that their “empathy quotient” had sharply declined over the previous decade, that almost 75% of them rated themselves as less caring or empathetic than the average student had thirty years prior. If this statistic is to be believed, you would then have to expect a SIMILAR decline in the CHURCH’S OWN CAPACITY TO CARE ABOUT OTHERS. Why empathy is so important is that it is a reminder that we are ALL frail and fallible human beings, and that once we begin to cultivate an air of superiority over others, regardless of whom and for whatever reasons, then we are in danger of losing our dignity and possibly even our SOUL.

What we as the Body of Christ have got to do is maintain a heart towards God that is clean and humble and trusting so that we never allow such destructive impulses to rise and overtake us. As Christians who believe we are ALL children of God, it is imperative that we cultivate a sense of “empathy” in our lives- a deep caring for others, ESPECIALLY for those FAR WEAKER than ourselves. Just think if those Romans soldiers had only had some EMPATHY towards Christ, had but shown a DEGREE of pity and compassion for him instead of derision and contempt, we would be PRAISING those men this morning instead of reviling

them for their shameful deed and the Church would have judged those men very differently over the past two thousand years. If the guards at Abu Ghraib had only demonstrated a little empathy towards their prisoners instead of treating them like wild animals, relating to them as persons of integrity and self-worth just like themselves, they would have DIGNIFIED instead of degraded themselves before God and the world.

What is MOST interesting is that empathy is not an instinctual activity, that is, it is not something we are born with or comes NATURALLY to us. Rather, it is a capacity that is LEARNED and CULTIVATED yet one we CAN develop because we have the promise of God's help in this. It all begins when we learn to recognize and fall in love with the one person who remains the GREATEST EXEMPLAR of that love- Jesus Christ himself. It's undeniable that our Lord's willing submission to that cross to die on behalf of the very same persons who ardently called for his death was the highest and noblest demonstration of empathy and love the world HAD ever or WILL ever see. He could have said, "The HELL with it. I ain't dying for ANYONE and certainly not for THESE people! I'm going back home to Nazareth and open up dad's carpentry shop. Then I'm going to get married and start a family just as my family keeps BEGGING me to. It's time I start thinking about MYSELF for once," and who among us could have BLAMED him. But he DIDN'T and the motivation behind his decision to go to that cross at Golgotha INSTEAD was the same that motivated his ENTIRE MINISTRY- it was his great devotion to his Heavenly Father and his deep and abiding love for humanity DESPITE her dismal history of often cruel and unspeakable behavior. Jesus possessed a profound sympathy for EVERYONE, but ESPECIALLY for the lost and the lonely, for the sick and the oppressed. It was love that compelled him to heal the LAME- that they might WALK again, the BLIND- that they might SEE again, and the DEMON POSSESSED- that they might REGAIN THEIR HUMANITY AND REJOIN SOCIETY once more. He dared to reach out to lepers and embrace prostitutes and eat with tax collectors when others refused to even go NEAR them. It was love that stirred him to travel some twenty-five miles out into the desert to a tiny outpost called Nain so he could comfort the heart and dry the eyes of a grieving widow who had lost her husband and now her only son. And though he did not know her name, Jesus MOST CERTAINLY knew her TEARS.

Friends, if we come away from this account of Jesus being whipped and mocked and spat upon simply saying to ourselves, "What a cruel and barbarous regime were those Romans? Thank God we don't live in the Roman Empire of two thousand years ago, and thank God I don't have to associate with those unconscionable soldiers," then WE COMPLETELY MISS THE POINT, for the truth is that that empire IS OUR EMPIRE and those soldiers ARE US! EVERY ONE of us is capable of such cruelty and insensitivity, and if you don't believe that, then you really DON'T understand your heart. However, if one's capacity to love REALLY CAN be learned and cultivated, then by reminding ourselves EVERY DAY of our Lord's cross and how he died upon it for persons as unworthy as ourselves, and by allowing ourselves to receive MORE of his forgiveness and love which he constantly offers us, we will begin to see that SAME capacity for empathy and care take root and flourish deep within OURSELVES. Our proud and selfish hearts will gradually become TRANSFORMED to resemble Jesus' OWN heart such that HIS concerns now become OUR concerns and our spirits, less cold and listless and

dull. Then, future people just might come to remember and judge US differently, not with derision and contempt--as history has those individuals who once mocked and abused our Lord--but with praise and admiration for showing great care and empathy in that same spirit of love JESUS HIMSELF did! Let us pray...

Almighty God, we pray for all victims of abuse whether they are victims of domestic violence or persecuted for their faith in you; whether the trauma has affected their minds, their bodies, their spirits, or perhaps all three. We pray for their healing and restoration, turning to the only One who has the power to make all things new. We ask you to surround them with your care and protect them by your loving might that they might enjoy health and healing, wholeness and strength, calmness and peace and love once again.

Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." He also said, "Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Therefore, we also pray that you would touch the hearts of those who hurt others. Heal their thinking, so that they may turn to you and seek your ways. Help them to know that every human being is a treasure to you. And we especially pray that you would help them to know that you are a forgiving God and can lead them on a path to new life. In Jesus' name. Amen.