

The Inevitability of Cruelty  
The Power of Love  
Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 53:3-5  
Reading from the Epistles: 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10  
Reading from the Gospels: Mark 15:16-20

Noteworthy in the pantheon of cinematic courtroom drama is the film *A Few Good Men*, in which two soldiers appear in a military courtroom, charged with the murder of an underperforming member of the company who died as a result of a hazing ritual which was possibly ordered by their senior officer, Col. Nathan Jessup, played by Jack Nicholson at his sinister, calculating, egomaniacal best. The flick is remembered primarily for the intense showdown between Nicholson's Col. Jessup and Lt. Daniel Kaffee, the lead defense attorney for the accused played by Tom Cruise, who not surprisingly, matches Nicholson's chest-puffing, arrogant bravado. "I want the truth!" "You can't handle the truth!" Even if you haven't seen the movie, you know those lines.

However, the quote that stuck with me came from Kevin Pollack's character, Lt. Weinberg, an unwilling co-counsel for the defense. When challenged as to why he "hated" the defendants, he thunders, "They beat up on a weakling, and that's all they did ... They tortured and

tormented a weaker kid. They didn't like him. So, they killed him. And why? Because he couldn't run very fast."

If you have ever felt the sting of public humiliation or if you have ever reflected with guilt upon a time when you intentionally or unintentionally initiated, contributed, or failed to intercede in the humiliation of someone else, you know something of the emotion behind Lt. Weinberg's censure. "They beat up on a weakling, and that's all they did ... They tortured and tormented a weaker kid. They didn't like him. So, they killed him. And why? Because he couldn't run very fast."

There is a look in the eyes of someone robbed of their humanity, and seen from a certain distance, say on the other side of the screen, or in a news story, or even in the image that comes to mind when reading a novel, you can literally feel your gut wrench, your heart rip, your throat constrict, and your eyes well at the thought of someone consigned to the hurt of humiliation. Unfortunately, and far too often, we have been too close to the trauma to perceive and understand those eyes. I speak to those occasions when we were to be found within the circle of complicity as perpetrators of pain or sidekicks in silence or as the laugh track for the hateful humorist.

I've always been a bit suspect of the self-acclaimed righteous who declare lives unfouled by the mistreatment of others, never having uttered a racist trope, laughed at an insensitive joke, perpetuated an ethnic stereotype, labeled an outsider, took advantage of their power over someone, or sought acceptance at someone else's expense. I want to ask them, "How did you grow up without going to middle school?"

I just don't think my school was that far from the norm. Middle school can be a brutal place, a human petri dish where the slightest difference, the microscopic flaw, the inevitable clumsy error, mistake or guffaw are all magnified to comic proportions at someone's expense. Every day was an exercise of avoiding abuse, calculating comebacks, perfecting insults, and sidestepping embarrassment. Rare is the person who escapes middle school unsullied ... or ... unscathed.

I'll readily confess I didn't. I laughed along with the verbal volleyball of taunts without concern for the butt of the joke; I mimicked the ethnic caricatures from the movies; quoted the insensitive comic's routine; and often failed to notice the hurt of the target or aggressively intervene on their behalf ... and I was the nice kid!

Like curb feelers on an old Cadillac or the distance sensors on your new Toyota, those well-earned embarrassment alarms you acquired in middle school stick with you for life. Some of you know I took a tumble while running a few weeks ago, managing to break a couple of ribs. And though it hurt like the dickens, the first thought that came to mind wasn't the searing pain, but the intense desire that nobody saw me fall ... or worse, filmed it, which would certainly become the GIF that keeps on giving. I could almost hear myself chanting as in prayer, "Please don't let anyone stop! Please don't let anyone stop."

I read somewhere that "your worst humiliation is only someone else's momentary entertainment." Embarrassment outduels physical pain.

A word often used but rarely contemplated to describe Christ's journey to the cross is **humiliation**. Good Friday practices will draw us to reflect on the physical pain Jesus endured - the lacerations from the whip; the thorns cutting through the flesh of his temple; the crack of bones upon being struck by rods swung like baseball bats; the pounding of the hammer and the piercing of nails through his wrists, metatarsals, and arches; the agony of lifting himself by those nailed wrists in order

to breathe. *Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?*

*...Sometimes it causes me to tremble.*

We can perceive, and maybe even relate to, the physical pain. Every preacher knows that each week they are preaching to at least two or three people who are dying of something, people for whom physical pain is a constant companion. Barbara Brown Taylor observed that "we need a God who knows about pain. Anyone who has suffered through even one night of deep hurt knows what it is to beg relief. Sometimes the prayer is answered and sometimes it is not, but those who have been there will often say that the strange, sweet presence of Christ in their suffering becomes dearer to them than the hope of recovery."

(Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain*)

The concept of Emmanuel, God with us, central to the identity of our Lord, is seldom more meaningful to us than when we are in pain. However, Mark offers hints that the power of *Christ with us* extends beyond our physical pain. Though we annually affirm this in song, *O sacred head, now wounded, with grief and shame weighed down*, we hesitate to take this in for fear of associating our savior with the experience of shame, embarrassment, or humiliation. In addition,

sensing Christ's public shame we fear confronting the reality of our own complicity in his humiliation.

Of course, the church has long balked at the implications of a suffering and shamed savior. It wasn't long after the crucifixion that folks started eschewing the notion of a disgraced redeemer, reasoning that the One who walked on the water, cast out demons, and healed the sick could have easily come down from the cross if he chose to. One early noncanonical document, *The Acts of John*, posited that during the three hours of darkness, from noon to three, Jesus actually descended from the cross and spoke with the apostle John, explaining that he was not really suffering and dying, but only in appearance. Jesus then remounts the cross and acts out the charade to the end. (Craddock, Boring, *The People's NT Commentary*)

Such thinking was condemned by the early church as the heresy of Docetism. And yet, the idea persists that crucifixion was a disposable choice Jesus could have revoked at any point along the way, and that the cross had been preplanned and choreographed since the day Adam and Eve packed their U-Haul and exited the garden. You see hints of this in the way Jesus is portrayed in the gospel of John, with Jesus

never being at a disadvantage, never stepping away from the director's chair.

However, this perspective diminishes the humanity of Christ. For if Jesus was fully human alongside his full divinity, then jumping down from the cross or avoiding the experience of embarrassment or shame wouldn't be possible. If Christ's humanity was only partial, he would not perceive what we experience.

There are many portraits of Christ found in scripture, the confessions, dissertations, and in the minds of countless theologians. And it is important to acknowledge that we can never harmonize them into one seamless narrative. We have to appreciate the different colors they bring to the larger portrait. But in our verses today, Mark invites us to ponder a big *what if*. What if ... Jesus knew the face-flushing sting of embarrassment? What if it wasn't just his side that was pierced, but also his spirit, his heart, his ego, his psyche, his feelings?

Today, Mark draws us into the courtyard of the governor's headquarters for a bit of spontaneous street theater as the attention seekers and posers exploit an opportunity to stroke their egos at Jesus'

expense. Once Pilate handed Jesus over to the soldiers to be crucified, the soldiers called together the whole cohort to watch them show how big and strong and powerful they were. They were bullies picking on the weak. Mark's description would crowd some three to six hundred into that limited space for the show, so you can imagine craning necks, taunting voices, hurled epithets. Mocking is the grill and Jesus is the meat.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Yes, you were, as was I. You were there whenever you were the butt of someone's joke, the target of someone's abuse, the one dressed in embarrassment and humiliation.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Yes, you were, as was I. You were there whenever you were the voice of denigration, the mouthpiece of malignant humor or vile prejudice, the hands of abuse, the laughter at someone else's expense. You were there in the crowd when you watched and did not intervene; when you observed in silence and acquiesced to the fear of being left out. You were there and so was I.

Mark wants us to see Jesus in the middle of all that. He both feels our humiliation ... and ... he sees our complicity. And yet, love persists, healing wounded spirits, embracing fractured minds. Love persists, calling us to repentance, equipping us to join in the work of healing this world's pain. The question for us as we look upon Jesus' humiliation is, are we listening?

I watched a searing documentary this week on how one phrase in the 13th Amendment has been twisted to perpetuate the subjugation of the heirs of slavery. Slavery didn't end. It was just redesigned, and the result is mass incarceration. The 13th Amendment to the Constitution provides that "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime ... shall exist."

No sooner than it was printed on paper, people found the loophole to exploit - "except as a punishment for a crime." If you make them criminal, you can continue to subjugate and essentially remove their freedom, eliminate their vote, dehumanize and humiliate them, and keep them down and out.

From D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* to several more recent presidential elections, that strategy has played a significant role. A senior advisor to one president admitted as much when he said their campaign "had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people." He said, "We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or blacks, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did." (*The 13th*, Netflix) It's a strategy that has eventuated in a prison system, a significant chunk of it for profit, that now holds 2.3 million in incarceration.

In 2010 Kalief Browder was walking home in the Bronx from a party with friends. He was stopped by police and arrested for a petty crime it turns out he did not commit. If he could post the bail of \$10,000, he could go home, but that was out of the question.

Here's where things get really squirrely. A high percentage of people charged with a crime accept plea deals, pleading guilty for

crimes they didn't commit because the thought of going to jail for what the mandatory minimums are is so excruciating. Of course, with a felony conviction, you won't be able to vote, you'll struggle to find work, and carry with you that scarlet letter for life. Kalief wouldn't accept the plea deal. He knew he was innocent. So, he was sent to the notorious Rikers prison to await trial. He sat in Rikers prison three years without a trial. Prison's power of humiliation and dehumanization took a toll on Kalief and inevitably he was pulled into the violence, beaten several times both by the people he was locked up with and the people guarding him. He attempted suicide several times. After three years the charges were unceremoniously dropped and Kalief was released ... but his spirit was still enslaved. Two years later, he hanged himself in his home. (*The 13th*, Netflix)

The psalmist understood: "But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people." The prophet Isaiah understood: "He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account." You think Jesus understood? "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."

Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Yes, you were and so was I. The nature of being human means that at various points we'll experience it as the humiliated, and at other times as the perpetrator, and at other times as those who assent by way of silence.

What we find in the courtyard of Pilate's praetorium is a God who fully understands our humiliation and also a love that challenges us to do better.

"He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases ... 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."  
Amen.