



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church  
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March 25, 2009

Midweek Lenten Worship

Mark 15:16-20

Pastor Randy Ott

**Forgive Us for Despising Our Savior's Claim!**

"Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." Did you ever wonder how the soldiers who were nailing Jesus to the cross, the soldiers who were there and had been doing this, what we just read about, what they thought as they heard that? I imagine to a certain degree there was a bit of a surprise because I suppose anyone that had breathe enough left to say anything was probably calling down curses on the guys that were attaching him to a cross. But you wonder if they thought to themselves, "I know exactly what I'm doing; these spikes, this hammer, your body, that cross – it's pretty self-evident, isn't it?" They were doing what they felt they had to do, Roman soldiers, ruling over their empire, ruling by fear and intimidation, by torture, by whatever other means it took so that the Might that was Rome could extend its rule and continue its rule. It didn't matter if they were stationed at some backwater outpost in the Roman Empire. Rome still had to be exalted. Those who opposed Rome still had to be put down and their job, as the fist of Caesar, was to make sure people knew what that fist could do. So they carried out their job and they did it in a way that would intimidate anyone that watched.

If you think of the things they did how they did it, you probably think to yourself, "I'll bet there's a special corner of hell reserved for people that act like that towards Jesus." And you probably think to yourself, "As Jesus cried out 'Father forgive them for they don't know what they are doing,' how could what they were doing relate to what we're doing in our daily lives?" But in reality, one of the things he was asking God to forgive these guys for that I'd say you and I often do is "Father forgive us for despising our Savior's claims." Part of what I think these Roman soldiers were doing and the incredible amount of pain they were inflicting was to show that they had no use for anyone that claimed to be Messiah, or King, or anything else that even remotely threatened Rome. They, as Roman soldiers, probably had a little bit going on for them of what has been described about us as Americans, "the ugly American."

Have you ever heard people talk about that? We meet someone who speaks a different language so we slow down and speak louder because then obviously they'll understand us because everyone must understand our culture. Heaven forbid we have to understand anyone else's. I think in their time there was a lot of "the ugly Roman" going around.

They were the world's super power. There was no rival. They were the reigning heavyweight champions of the world who ruled the world. They had put down all the rebellions that they found. They had extended the peace of Rome around the Mediterranean and they seemed to be extending it as far as they cared to, until they got tired of fighting for awhile. Now here they are in Judea and they are ruling over a people that don't want them there. I have to believe some of the Jews who didn't want them there had told these Roman soldiers, these occupational forces, about Messiah who was going to come. "And when Messiah comes things will be better and we'll get rid of you and he will rule over a kingdom like Solomon's of old." To them it probably sounded a lot like someone from England today talking about King Arthur, right? "King David? Who is that to me? That makes no sense to me." But now you start talking about this Messiah that's going to come and crush Rome, to these soldiers? These soldiers are supposed to live in fear of the boogie man that is Messiah? And now here is the guy that you say it is? He's beaten and he's bloodied; do you think they took a little bit extra in kicking him or beating him or spitting on him to show everyone else they were ruling over, "You don't mess with Rome. You don't say you're Messiah. You don't say you're a king. This Messiah that we were supposed to be afraid of that was going to deliver you; you thought this guy was it? Look at him! We made a crown of thorns and stuck it on his head just to show how absurd your claims are about Messiah coming and getting rid of Rome. He claimed to be a king that ruled over some kind of kingdom? Here it is. Here is your staff. Here, take it again; another one in the face. Here's a purple robe." They despised the Savior's claim because they thought they were much more important than Jesus. They didn't think of him as Messiah. They just thought of him as another lunatic that was claiming to be something he wasn't who Rome was going to have to put down. And they did. They had no use for his claims because they were Rome. Why would they need his claims?

Still, you have to be thinking, "That's nowhere near close to us." But the reality is, in the world that we live in, there are many, many people that still despise our Savior's claims. The claims he makes on our lives, the claims he makes about who he is, the exclusive claims he makes that he is the only way, truth and the life. That doesn't sit well in our society. And because that is attacked so often, that means you and me who stand up for Jesus, at times, will also be attacked. And here's where you and I will be tempted to deny our Savior's claims because in a sense we think we are more important than he is.

I'll give you an example of what I'm thinking about. I had a friend once that told me about a college professor that made it his stated goal at the start of every semester, at the start of every new class that came through his classroom, that if any of them there happened to be Christians, by the end of his class he was going to just beat that Christianity out of them. He was going to show them how backward they were, how foolish they were. He was going to use every bit of ridicule, every bit of his wisdom and his knowledge to paint them into a corner, to make them feel like a fool and by the end of the time they spend in his classroom, to abandon the faith. That was his goal that he stated publicly.

If you put yourself in the shoes of a Christian student in that classroom, you might say it's not going to happen right at the start. But if it keeps coming day after day after day, if you keep being told by this guy, maybe even your classmates that are joining in on it that you're backwards, you're out of touch with the times, you're superstitious, this is folly, look at how this doesn't make sense when you put it together with that, and because you're not at all confident in how to handle your Bible, you're torn up by it. Finally you just want it to go away. Your faith has become an albatross around your neck that feels like a dead weight every time you take a step into that room. And maybe somewhere back in the depths of your mind your sinful nature is screaming at you, "They're right! Enter the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and set this stuff aside so we can get out there and have some fun!"

Our own comfort level maybe becomes more important to us. We deny our Savior's claims on our lives because we don't want to sacrifice a little bit of discomfort. This is going to happen in the same way in other areas of our life because constantly in our society, if you watch any form of the media, television, the movies, quite often you'll find Christianity being depicted as though you're being patted on the head for being an out of touch superstitious lot who are just fools and idiots. They lived in a state where that's what our governor told us once. Everyone who needed religion just needed a crutch. They were all weaklings.

When you're sitting with your other Christians, it's kind of easy to say "They're fools." But when you're bombarded by that day after day after day, it becomes less easy to do. We are weak and we don't always go to our strength. At times we will cave in, and for our own comfort, we will remain quiet. We will not speak up when we should and we will speak up when we should not. And we will fail our God and despise his claims on us and on our lives and who he is and what he has done for us, and then we will have to cry out "Forgive us for despising our Savior's claims." And we will have to add to that prayer "Father, help us to make Jesus the most important part of our life" because it's only when he is at the center of our lives that we find the strength to face these accusations, these attacks. And it's only when he is at the center of our life do we find the strength to be lifted up by his love after we have fallen.

You and I are going to recognize that we are going to sin and we are going to fall. The soldiers, they had no inkling that they needed to repent of anything. They were Roman soldiers. Guilt was not something they packed in their mess kit when they marched. They didn't carry it with them because it wouldn't serve them as soldiers. For them repentance and turning away from a sin and finding forgiveness wasn't something that was on the top of their "to do list." Rule by terror and intimidation, be the boot of Caesar that crushed the people you were ruling in the dirt, that was their job. They did it, and they did it well.

You and I, we are a little different, right? Repentance is in our vocabulary. We know God's claims on us. We know that he has called us to take up our cross and follow him. But you and I so often fail it. We know his claims. We know that he is the one who made us and he is the one that gave us these commands to do and don't do. We know

we should do it just for that reason because he made us and he tells us to do it. But here is the fact of that matter. You and I will never find the strength to do what we ought just by that motivation.

You and I have a greater motivation. You and I know why Jesus stood there and let blow after blow come from the mocking staff across his face. We know why he restrained himself in pure humility when they shoved the crown of thorns onto his head. We know why he cried out in pain but not in hatred or anger that called down the wrath of God on those who nailed him to the cross. We know why he endured all of this torture and agony and the very depths of hell itself he endured because he was doing it for you and me. He was doing it for the whole world, for all the times that all of the people would turn their back on him and never even turn back to him. He died for every last one of those sins of every person that ever has lived or ever will live.

You and I know that he has done it for us because his Spirit has come to us in the water and in the Word and in the wafer and in the wine and has touched our hearts and created faith and strengthened faith. He focuses on this truth, not something that's in us, but on Jesus. In Jesus you see a love that is amazing, a love that forgives us when we think we're more important than he is, when we lapse into the sin of idolatry of making ourselves our own god and our fun and our excitement that goes against God's will, we chase it at times and God says, "Come back to me." When his Law leads us to turn away from sin and when his Gospel shows us how our sins have been taken away, he welcomes us with open arms. He doesn't say "Here are some hoops you have to jump through." He says "I've done it all. You are forgiven. I endured it all. I didn't lash out and hammer back with the full wrath of God and rank upon rank of angels hammering down on the soldiers that nailed me to the cross. I endured it all because I wanted you to be forgiven."

When we see that, that's when Jesus becomes the most important thing of our lives. When we keep that at the center of our lives, it changes us. It changes who we are. It changes why we do what we do. It leads us to find joy even in adversity. It doesn't mean we like it when people attack us. But we can be like the early Christians who rejoice that they were counted worthy to suffer for the Name of Christ.

You and I know we'll never have to suffer as Christ did. So to suffer for him now for a time, God will help us through that. We can be absolutely certain of it because our God is a God of grace.