

"Gathering at the Cross"
Journey through Lent Sermon Series #6
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(Lk. 19:35-38; 23:20, 24-25, 32-43)

In our world today the cross has come to be a rather prevalent fixture. Many people wear crosses around their necks and on their ears as jewelry, and some even have crosses tattooed on their bodies. Crosses come in all shapes and sizes and in all the colors of the rainbow. There are gold crosses, silver crosses, red crosses, blue crosses. There is the Celtic cross, the Greek cross, the Latin cross, the Anchor cross, the Jerusalem cross, the St. Andrew's cross, the Trinity cross, the Budded cross, and the list goes on.

And in every city and town across this country one will find a church with a cross perched atop its steeple. Some glow at night as neon lights. I recall that on the top of the steeple of my seminary, Gordon-Conwell, there was a lit yellow cross which I learned pilots actually use to guide them to Logan airport in Boston.

John Ortberg writes, "The cross has become the most widely recognized symbol in the world. It marks more graves, graces more jewelry, and sits atop more churches than any other design. The making of the sign of the cross is known from basilicas to baseball diamonds. Finding a logo has become big business, but no corporation, country, or cause has produced such an enduring or widespread image."¹

However, it's fascinating to me that the cross should come to have this position of respectability, because back in the first century AD the cross was anything but respectable. The cross brought fear into the hearts of millions, and it was the cruelest form of capital punishment known to humankind. People looked with contempt upon those who were executed by crucifixion. The cross was degrading, humiliating, and frightening. In the first century AD, wearing a cross as jewelry would be like wearing little electric chairs as earrings today. It would be considered poor taste.

How is it, then, that the cross has come to hold such a position of acceptance in our time? It's because the cross is the source of hope for the followers of Christ. It's the cross that proclaims the love of God for sinners. And it's the cross that begins to sensitize us to the depths of what it cost God to reconcile the world to Himself and provide eternal life for you and me in heaven.

Everything began so well on Palm Sunday. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, and people waved palm branches and spread their coats on the road to pave the way. They hailed Jesus as the Messiah, and they shouted, “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” But what began so well on Palm Sunday ended so terribly on Good Friday just five days later. And the disciples who led with way in the procession during the triumphal entry ultimately abandoned Him, and they all ran away. Then Jesus was crucified on the cross.

There were many groups of people who gathered at the cross that day, and I want us to take some time this morning to examine them individually and see what we can learn from their experience. The first group to consider that gathered at the cross is *the Jewish leaders*. These were the people who held the power in Jerusalem. They were the religious elites, and they knew their Bibles really well. But although they knew the words of Scripture, they clearly didn’t understand what they meant. They had read about the Messiah who was coming, but they thought he would be an earthly king – a ruler who would deliver the Jewish people and overthrow their Roman oppressors.

When they saw Jesus hanging on the cross, it was clear to them He wasn’t the Messiah they were looking for. They knew what the Scripture said, “*Cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree*” (Gal. 3:13, Dt. 21:22). In their minds it was impossible for the Messiah to die on a cross, so they taunted Him: “*If you’re really the Messiah, prove it to us once and for all by coming down from the cross.*” But Jesus didn’t do it, and they thought of Him as a charlatan and a failure.

How many times does Jesus disappoint us and not fulfill our expectations about what the Messiah is supposed to do? We may not taunt Jesus like these Jewish leaders did that day, but we begin to question His power and His authority and His plan. And we wonder if He’s really the Messiah we thought He was going to be when we began this journey of faith. “If you’re really the Messiah, if you’re really God, then prove it to me, Jesus. Do what I ask,” we say. In some ways, we’re just like the Jewish leaders who gathered at the cross on Good Friday.

The next group to notice is *the soldiers*. They were there because they had to be. It was their job. They were in charge of the execution. And to lighten the load and pass the time they joined in mocking the Lord. When He said, “I thirst,” they tried to give Him wine vinegar to drink. But their purpose in all of this was to humiliate Jesus. They must have felt very superior seeing yet another pretender king brought to his knees by the mighty Roman Empire.

We’re also told that as Jesus was being crucified, the soldiers divided His clothing. In the Roman Empire the executioners were entitled the criminal’s last effects. Scholars believe that the four items the soldiers divided among

themselves were Jesus' sandals, turban, outer garment, and His belt. But Jesus also had a tunic that was seamless and woven in one piece. The soldiers decided not to tear it into four pieces and divide it among them, and instead they threw dice to see who would get it. This fulfilled an OT prophecy in Psalm 22 where it says, "*They cast lots for my clothing.*"

While the soldiers threw their dice, did they have any idea that they were fulfilling biblical prophecy? Did they realize that just a few feet above their heads the central event in human history was taking place? How often are we unaware of what God is doing right around us because we're so preoccupied with our jobs, or we're concerned about getting our fair share of the spoils, or we're oblivious to the pain and suffering of the people right next to us? The soldiers completely missed what God was doing that day. How often are you and I spiritually unaware just like them?

Not all the soldiers mocked Jesus that day or missed the identity of the man who hung on the cross. In Mark's gospel we're told there was a centurion at the foot of the cross who noticed there was something different about Jesus. Philip Yancey writes, "When Jesus died, even a gruff Roman soldier was moved to exclaim, 'Surely this man was the Son of God!' He saw the contrast all too clearly between his brutish colleagues and their victim."²

The thieves are the next group I want you to notice. Two of them were crucified along with Jesus on either side of Christ, and they represent two different responses to Jesus' crucifixion. One mocked Christ for His powerlessness. "What kind of Messiah can't even save Himself?" he asked. But the other recognized a different kind of power was present in Jesus. And taking the risk of faith, he asked the Lord to remember him when Christ came into His kingdom. That day the dying thief saw more clearly than anyone else the real nature of Jesus' kingdom. In a real sense the two thieves represent the choice that all of us have to make as it relates to the cross. Do we look at Jesus' death as an example of God's impotence, or do we see it as the proof of God's love?

Next, notice the **women and John**. There were three Mary's who are mentioned in the gospels as being at the foot of the cross – Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the wife of Clopas (who some scholars believe was one of the two people to whom Jesus appeared on the road to Emmaus). We're told in John's gospel that Mary's sister Joanna was also there with her. Here at the foot of the cross we see four soldiers throwing dice, but we also see four women keeping faith. We also see the disciple John. These are the people who stayed with Jesus to the bitter end, and perhaps it is their eyewitness accounts that give us the details of what is recorded in the gospels concerning our Lord's death.

But *where are the others disciples?* Peter and the others are nowhere to be found. When things got hard and being a follower of Jesus became dangerous, they all abandoned Christ, and they fled. And in the case of Peter he denied even knowing the Lord on three different occasions. Then the rooster crowed and confirmed the prediction Jesus made about how even Peter would deny Him. And the disciple wept bitter tears of shame.

When has the Christian life gotten hard for you, and how have you been tempted to run and hide? In what ways have you been embarrassed to be identified as a follower of Jesus for fear that it might cost you something – in your business, in your relationships, at your school? How does your life contradict what you say you believe, and in what ways are you denying the Lord yourself today? May we be like the women and like John who stayed close to Jesus even when it was risky, even when it was dangerous.

The final person at the foot of the cross I want you to notice is *Joseph of Arimathea*. We didn't read about him in our text today, but he's mentioned later in Luke 23. To his credit Joseph went into the halls of power and asked Pilate for the body of Jesus so that he might give the Lord a decent burial. We're told that Joseph was a secret disciple of Jesus, but there really can be no such thing. Either the discipleship will eventually dispel the secrecy, or the secrecy will nullify the discipleship. At the cross Joseph ultimately showed his true colors and declared his allegiance to the Lord, and we remember him today for his courage.

Are you trying to be a secret disciple of Jesus? When are you going to come out of the shadows and claim Christ for yourself like Joseph eventually did? Either your discipleship will dispel the secrecy, or the secrecy will nullify your discipleship. Which will it be for you?

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As I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, the symbol of the cross experienced a profound transformation in a most remarkable way, all because of the death of Jesus. John Ortberg has written, "The cross was changed from the symbol of a human empire's power into a symbol of the suffering love of God. It was changed from an expression of ultimate threat into an expression of ultimate hope. It came, in a sense, to express the exact opposite of its original purpose — that the power of embraced sacrifice is greater than the power of coercion. How did this happen? Jesus chose it. He chose to die on it. After Friday, neither the cross nor the world could ever stay the same."³

What about you and me? As we gather at the cross this Palm Sunday and contemplate the sacrifice Jesus made for us, how does it affect us? What difference does it make in how we think about Jesus and how we live our lives day-to-day? Can we gather at the cross and go away unaffected, unchanged?

I close with this. Many years ago, the Catholic bishop of Paris was preaching one Sunday morning, and he told the story of a young man who was hanging around with his drinking buddies one afternoon. They became bored in their activities that day, and they were trying to think of something to do for laughs. One fellow piped up and suggested that one of their group be sent into the Catholic Church nearby, enter the confessional, and really shock the socks off the elderly priest at the church with a wild story of immorality and drunkenness. Some aspects of the story they made up were true and others were outlandishly fabricated.

The young man of our story was selected to be the "confessor," and he entered the church while his buddies waited for him outside. The young man walked into the confessional area, and he entered the booth. Then the voice of the old priest said, "Yes, my son, is there something you wish to confess?"

The young man proceeded to tell the wild story he and his friends had made up, telling the most explicit details and showing no remorse for his supposed actions.

When he finished, the elderly priest asked if he was through. The young man said, "Yes."

And then the wise old priest said, "Young man, you have committed a grave sin. What I want you to do for your penance is to go to the chapel down the hall, walk up to the railing and kneel down. Then I want you to look up at the face of the Savior on the crucifix, and say, 'You did this for me, and I don't give a [and he used an expletive].'"

The young man was shocked. He exited the confessional booth and proceeded to the chapel. He walked up to the railing, knelt down, looked into the face of the Savior on the crucifix, and he said, "You did this for me, and I don't give a...." The young man didn't finish the sentence. He got up and hurried outside and joined his waiting buddies amidst the laughter.

At this point in his telling of the story, the Bishop of Paris leaned over the pulpit and he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I want you to know that the young man in this story is now your Bishop. It was me."⁴

Calvary is not a suitable resting place. Whenever you spend time and gather at the foot of the cross, you begin to see who Jesus really is? And gathering at the cross has a way of pulling you up short and sending you on a different path. Our Lord laid down His perfect, sinless life as an atonement for your sins and mine in order to give us abundant life in this world and eternal life in the world to come. In gratitude and humility, should we not respond afresh in faith on this Palm Sunday and lay down our lives for Him? The choice is ours. Amen.

¹ John Ortberg, *What Is This Man?* p. 173.

² Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, p. 203.

³ John Ortberg, *Sunday Everything Changed*, p. unknown.

⁴Source unknown.