

Instead of Me

Message #6 – “Dying for Me”
Matthew 27:27-54

St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown
April 4, 2021

Pastor David Woolverton

²⁷Then the governor’s soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. ²⁸They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, ²⁹and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand. Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him. “Hail, king of the Jews!” they said. ³⁰They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. ³¹After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. ³²As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. ³³They came to a place called Golgotha (which means “the place of the skull”). ³⁴There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it. ³⁵When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. ³⁶And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. ³⁷Above his head they placed the written charge against him: this is Jesus, the king of the Jews. ³⁸Two rebels were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁹Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads ⁴⁰and saying, “You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!” ⁴¹In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. ⁴²“He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! He’s the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. ⁴³He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” ⁴⁴In the same way the rebels who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him. ⁴⁵From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. ⁴⁶About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”). ⁴⁷When some of those standing there heard this, they said, “He’s calling Elijah.” ⁴⁸Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. ⁴⁹The rest said, “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to save him.” ⁵⁰And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. ⁵¹At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split ⁵²and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. ⁵³They came out of the tombs after Jesus’ resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people. ⁵⁴When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, “Surely he was the Son of God!”

“It’s not personal. It’s business.”

The Godfather. 1972. Michael Corleone said it. He had just masterminded a plan to bump off Mark McCluskey, the corrupt police captain, along with Virgil Sollozzo, a rival mob boss who was trying to assassinate Michael's father, Vito Corleone. Several in the room laughed at his plan... including Sonny, Michael's oldest brother. Sonny asks Michael, then a college student, if he really wants to get involved with the "family business" and put blood on his hands – and Michael replies, "It's not personal, Sonny. It's strictly business."

Many of us remember that scene in the movie. But Michael Corleone – or more specifically, Mario Puzo, who wrote *The Godfather* trilogy – was not the first person to use that phrase. The person who coined the phrase was Otto Berman – a real life mobster within the ranks of organized crime in the 1930s.

Born into a Jewish family in 1891, Berman was a whiz at math and went on to become an amazing accountant – although he chose to work with some of the most notorious organized crime bosses in New York City. Because of the nature of his "work," Berman would use that phrase – "it's not personal, it's business" – in order to distance himself emotionally and mentally from the effects of what he and his employers would do to other people as they carried out their "family business."ⁱ

To this day, many business executives, real estate moguls, store owners, and even way too many church people have used that phrase to do the same thing—emotionally distance themselves from the impact of their actions.

It's not personal. It's business.

Did anyone ever say that to you? Have you ever said that to someone else?

The centurion was not off to a good day. It started way too early for his liking. Three crucifixions that day – and he needed to get them all up on their crosses by nine o'clock in the morning. One of them had already been drawing a lot of attention. A huge crowd was forming. The Roman governor had already been riding his case about crowd control. He didn't want any more violent outbursts. This would be a two – maybe three – cups of coffee morning.

Once the decision was made, crucifixion was pretty straight forward. He knew how to do it. In fact, it seemed like it was becoming a part of his daily routine. He actually noticed how calloused he was becoming to it all. The sounds of people screaming . . . the crowds trying to get his attention, pleading their case – either in support of the criminal or in support of the crucifixion. . . the sights of blood everywhere. . . the agony of the criminals as the nails were hammered into their wrists and feet. . . the smells (oh, the smells!) – of body odor and blood – that was the hardest for him to ignore . . . But, he thought, it's not personal, it's business.

But this day. . . this day was different. It was more intense. *Much* more intense. The crowds were larger . . . and angrier. Pontius Pilate had ordered that one of the criminals – this Jesus guy that he had heard a lot about – had to undergo

scourging. Scourging was outright torture. He knew because he had done it countless times before. The criminal would be stripped naked and tied to a wooden post and then whipped with a special three-thonged scourging whip called a *Flagrum*. Each thong of the *Flagrum* was made of leather – and at the end of each thong were two or more sharp and roughly shaped metal balls that would both add power to the whipping as well as tear into the person’s skin.ⁱⁱ The *Flagrum* was designed to inflict major damage to the convicted criminal. The whipping would occur all over the person’s back, backside and legs – but if, for some reason, the whip curled around to other body parts, all the better. The Roman way was to do it 39 times. . . 39 lashes with the whip. . . because, well, to be frank, they knew how much a person could withstand – just enough to take them beyond the point of endurance, but not to the point of death.ⁱⁱⁱ But the criminal would certainly learn that their behavior – whatever it was that they had done – it was not going to be tolerated by the Roman way of life. The Romans were, after all, lovers of peace.

It’s not personal. It’s business. Roman peace had to be preserved.

The centurion knew his job. He had risen in rank over the years by obeying orders. Now he commanded 100 soldiers who obeyed *his* commands. They prepared Jesus -- and the other two -- for crucifixion. Sure, his soldiers had a little bit of fun with Jesus. He was being accused of being the “King of the Jews” – and so, the soldiers – well, let’s just say that they treated Him... royally. Did they go overboard? Well, maybe....

But it’s not personal. It’s business.

Whether you’re a religious leader . . . or a Roman soldier . . . or one of the persons in the crowd that was mocking Jesus, it’s too easy to believe that what they were doing in that moment was “not personal, but strictly business.” Doing so would enable them to sleep that night. Doing so would enable them to live with the decisions that put Jesus there on the cross. Doing so would keep them from engaging the true story behind what was really going on in that moment.

You see, **it’s possible to accept the reality of the cross of Christ, but not accept its power to change your life.**

So, they all watched. Watched and waited . . . and remained emotionally distant from what they were doing.

But that’s not how the week started. The week actually started with a parade – a triumphal entry – with Jesus coming into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophet’s words in **Zechariah 9:9**. This is what it says –

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,*

*humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

As Jesus rode that donkey toward the city, crowds began to realize what was happening. They began to believe that a new day had dawned. They made the connection with Zechariah's prophecy. Their Messiah was coming and surely, He would take down Rome! So, they rejoiced. They shouted "*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!*" (**Matthew 21:9**) – and they waved palm branches and threw their cloaks onto the ground -- as their version of the "red carpet" being rolled out to welcome their Savior.

The religious leaders were there too, of course. They made the connection to the Zechariah passage as well. . . and they didn't like it. They didn't like it at all. They shouted to Jesus through the crowd's noise – "Hey, tell your followers to stop shouting 'Hosanna' as if you're the new king!" But instead of quieting the crowd, Jesus shouted back to the religious leaders, "If I tell them to be quiet, the very stones would cry out."

In other words, nothing can quell the movement of God's Spirit. Nothing can squelch what God is doing to free His people from bondage.

So, they processed onward to Jerusalem. As they saw the city, Jesus, deeply moved, wept over it (Luke 19:41) – saying,

*³⁷ "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!³⁸ See, your house is left to you desolate" (**Matthew 23:37-38**).*

This is really a key moment in Jesus's journey to the cross. For generations, God has been inviting His people to turn their hearts to Him, to repent, to experience life the way God intended. Messenger after messenger brought the invitation – and each time, the people not only rejected the messengers, but also the God who sent them.

You see, **it's difficult to repent when you don't believe that you've sinned.**

Processing on, they arrived at the Temple. Once there, Jesus "*drove out all who were selling and buying in the Temple, and He overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves*" (**Matthew 21:12-13**). He was angry by what He saw. God had never intended for forgiveness to become a transaction. He had never intended for the Temple to become a marketplace of blood money.

But I guess the religious leaders felt that it wasn't personal. It was strictly business.

That was how the week began. And it got progressively worse . . . ultimately leading to the cross.

For six hours, the centurion had watched Jesus struggle to breathe. And then, in the final moments of Jesus's life, everything changed. Look at verse 50 --

⁵⁰ And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

Two things about this verse are so incredibly important. First, notice the words "**gave up.**" In Greek, the verb that used here is the verb "**aphiemi.**" It's the combination of two words – **apo**, which means "**from,**" and "**hiemi,**" which means "**to release or send.**" Here in this verse, the verb is in what's called the Aorist tense – a simple past tense – and it's in the active voice, rather than the passive voice. What that means is that Jesus's death in this moment was a single event in time, a totally completed action ... and the occurrence of Jesus's death – His "*giving up of His Spirit*" – was an action that He Himself did. Death did not take Him. He Himself released His Spirit from His body and died. Even in the moment of His death, Matthew wants us to know that Jesus was not a victim.

The second important thing to notice here in this verse is that that verb that was translated as "gave up" – aphiemi – is the same verb that is also translated as "**to forgive.**" When we forgive, we "release" the other person from the ramifications of their offense. So, Matthew's choice of words here is really powerful. At the cross, it is at the moment of Jesus's death – when He releases His Spirit from His earthly body – it is at that moment that forgiveness for the sins of humanity is secured -- completely, once and for all. **Forgiveness for humanity intersects with the blood of Jesus on the Cross.**

It's at that moment that we read in verses 51-53 . . .

⁵¹ At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split ⁵² and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. ⁵³ They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.

Everything changed at the moment of Jesus's death. Everything.

Why? – Because **for God, everything is personal.**

The curtain of the temple was torn from top to bottom – as if God Himself ripped open the curtain that separated the people from the Holy of Holies, from that place that marked the Presence of our Holy God. No longer would any burnt offerings be required to bring about atonement for the sins of the people. No longer would the religious rituals of sacrifices attempt to gain access to the heart of God. Jesus's death accomplished it all. Jesus paid it all. Jesus Himself became the Lamb of God that took away the sins of the world.

And creation, as well, felt the shift. The earth shook. Rocks split. Tombs broke open. Dead people started rising.

And then we read verse 54 --

⁵⁴ When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"

As often as he had worked crucifixion duty, the centurion had never seen anything like this before. Of all of the "religious" people who were there at that moment – of all of those who had approached this moment from an emotional distance so that they didn't have to take personally the responsibility of putting an innocent man to death . . . nothing could prepare them for what they had just seen.

Yes, it is true that you can accept the reality of the cross, but not accept its power to change your life. But in that moment, the centurion came face-to-face with another truth – namely, that when it comes to Jesus, **even when it's too late to change what you've done, it's never too late to change you.**

Life change, you see, is GOD's business. And it's very personal.

If Jesus can heal the heart of the man who crucified Him, He can certainly heal yours. If Jesus can forgive the sins of those who put Him on the cross, He can certainly forgive yours. And if Jesus's death can shake the world out of its entire history of being separated from God, He can certainly shake you out of your emotionally distant slumber and give you new life, a renewed missional purpose, and a hope in being resurrected from the dead.

Jesus's death was very personal. And it was God's business.

Jesus died *for you*.

There are a lot of Michael Corleones out there in our world. And a lot of Otto Bermans. We don't know what, in their life stories, is particularly redemptive. But for the centurion who nailed Jesus to the cross? I wonder how his life was changed by what he saw that day.

The cross of Christ reminds us that it's never too late to change you.

Are you ready to make it personal?

Let's pray our prayer together: **Lord, what do you need me to see, what do you need me to hear, what do you need me to know, what do you need me to do? I am your servant in Jesus's name. Amen.**

ⁱ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otto_Berman

ⁱⁱ "The Scourging Whip," <https://www.indyprops.com/pp-flagrum.htm>; and <https://www.bible-history.com/past/flagrum.html>.

ⁱⁱⁱ See also <https://web.archive.org/web/20020219102431/http://www.pixelworks.com.ph/shroud/scourging.htm>