

Humiliated Jesus

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

4th in a five-part series

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John 19:17-30 (NRSV)

So they took Jesus; ¹⁷ and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. ¹⁸ There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. ¹⁹ Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." ²⁰ Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. ²¹ Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" ²² Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written." ²³ When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. ²⁴ So they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it." This was to fulfill what the scripture says,

"They divided my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots."

²⁵ And that is what the soldiers did.

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." ²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

²⁸ After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty." ²⁹ A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. ³⁰ When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Philippians 2:5-11 (NRSV)

⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

What do the onlookers see on the cross at Golgotha?

A humiliated villager from Galilee.

What is the truth?

They see God's love enacted on a wretched symbol of humankind's inhumanity.

Every week we gather to worship Jesus as our Lord and Redeemer, Creator and Sustainer, the faithful Messiah who has reconciled the whole world with God. Indeed, we proclaim to all who will listen that this man, Jesus from Nazareth, was and is God incarnate.

Not surprisingly then, it is hard for us to grasp the way that he was viewed on that dark and terrifying Friday in Jerusalem nearly 2,000 years ago. How could we really be expected to understand that to nearly everyone in Jerusalem that day, Jesus was little more than another failed would-be Messiah, tortured and then humiliated by the Romans, who used the horror that was crucifixion to demonstrate yet again the fate that awaited those seen as

opposing the power of Caesar. “King of Jews” . . . how ridiculous a claim, how shameful a death.

But understand it we must. It is here at Golgotha, as Jesus hangs on the cross, that we learn the concreteness of God’s love for us – God’s own son dead and humiliated, the price paid for each of us. The crowds that week *expected* a triumphant Jesus leading them to freedom from the Roman pagans; they *got* the humiliated Jesus, who showed them the unimagined extent of God’s love for them.

The Humiliation of Christ

A humiliating death on a cross. No one expected this of God. Indeed, for many in the Greco-Roman world, the sarcastic phrase, “How silly a god to get himself crucified” would have summed it up quite well.

Rome ruled the New Testament world and did so with the most rank-and-status-conscious culture ever known. Frankly, life was little more than a relentless quest to gain status and honor. Even wealth was desired only for the status it might bring.

Philippi, in Greece, had a unique history and was the most Roman city outside Italy. When Paul arrived in Philippi, we can be sure that he felt like he had stepped into another world. The Roman obsession with status and honor was every bit as evident in Philippi as it was in Rome.

Yet in today’s passage from Philippians, Paul calls upon two images to portray the selflessness of Jesus Christ. First, he uses “slave” (v.7) – the most dishonorable *public status* one could have, and then “cross” (v.8) – the most dishonorable *public humiliation* one could suffer.

It is surely impossible for us to really grasp the shocking nature of Paul’s claim that Jesus, God himself, had taken on the form of a slave, been crucified, and then exalted so that all creation might bow before him. Indeed, the average Philippian was probably less shocked than simply amused. The Roman world scoffed at the very idea.

The humiliation of Christ turns the world upside. Power is weakness. Honor is humiliation. First is last. Victory is death on a cross. And for whom did Christ turn the world upside-down? For whom was he humiliated? For you and for me. Surely, this ought to stagger us, to drive us to our knees as we throw ourselves before such a God and sing praises to his name.

Expectations

Our expectations have everything to do with how we understand and relate to the world around us. For example, how many times have you gone to a movie with very high expectations only to be disappointed because the film didn’t quite measure up to what you had hoped it would be. Or, you’ve gone to the movie with low expectations and found yourself very pleasantly surprised; it was better than you thought it would be. I’ve learned that my expectations of a movie inevitably shape my experience of the movie. . . . That’s how it is in much of life. Our expectations of people, of work, of school, inevitably shape our experiences. We come to nothing as only a blank slate.

We even have expectations of God, plenty of them, and the Bible encourages us in this. God answers prayers. God takes care of us. God will not abandon us. God makes promises and God keeps them.

Yet, there is a problem. It is one thing to affirm that God keeps God’s promises. It is another to know *how* God’s promise-keeping will be accomplished. It is in this “how” that our expectations can often lead us astray. We think we know *how* God will answer our prayers. We think we know *how* God will accomplish his promise-keeping. But with God, we learn that, as the old saying goes, “expect the unexpected.”

Waiting and expecting

The Jews of Jesus day were all about waiting and expecting. For most of the previous five centuries they had chafed under foreign rulers, sometimes even enduring desecration of their temple and of their rituals. And they waited for God to step in, to send a deliverer, to raise up a new king from the House of David, a Messiah, who would defeat the pagan oppressors and cleanse the temple.

The Jews were quite sure how this would all look when it happened. God’s Messiah would

arrive in wonder and power and might and glory for all to see. No one could miss the glorious day of God's great victory and the establishment of God's kingdom on earth. All this would be an event for the whole world to witness and to embrace.

Such were the Jews' expectations. All well-founded in the Hebrew Scriptures. But what did they get instead?

A baby born to a young, engaged mom from the good-for-nothing village of Nazareth in southern Galilee. These were not people of means or of power. Just plain folks. A baby, who is not only the long-awaited Messiah, but is God himself.

And as Paul reminds us in today's passage from Philippians, the unexpected just kept coming. Would Jesus throw out the hated Romans? Did he oust Caiaphas and the priestly hierarchy? No, none of this. Instead, "he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross" (2:8). Later, Jesus' disciples would claim that his faithfulness, even to the point of death, had reconciled all humanity to God. God's victory had been won in the darkness of Golgotha.

Because

One of the current debates in Pauline scholarship is whether verse 6 of Paul's Christ-hymn in Philippians 2 should be translated: "*though* he was in the form of God" or "*because* he was in the form of God." Did Jesus take on all our weaknesses and suffer a humiliating death *despite* being God or *because* he is God? I hope that Paul had in mind the "because," for it makes starkly clear that the cross reveals to us God's true nature. What matters most to God is *revealed* in the cross . . . and that is love.

I've shared with you before something written by NT scholar, Morna Hooker. It is worth repeating:

"Christ did not cease to be in the 'form of God' when he took the form of a slave, anymore than he ceased to be the 'Son of God' when he was sent into the world. On the contrary, it is *in his self-emptying and his humiliation that he reveals what God is like.*"

Crucifixion

I've written at length in these studies about crucifixion. The basics are straightforward. Crucifixion was simply the most horrible way the Romans had available to publicly torture those who opposed Rome. The process of dying was painful and often went on for several days. The mounting of the victim on the cross ensured that death came by slow suffocation, for as the dying persons grew increasingly unable to lift themselves they could no longer expand their lungs and breathe.

The Romans did not invent crucifixion but they did perfect it and used it more widely than any empire before them. Crucifixion was not the death meted out to common criminals; it was generally reserved for those who stood up to the power of Rome. Thus, for example, when Jesus was a boy, several thousand Galilean Jews were crucified along the roadways to put down a rebellion against Roman authority. The sign over Jesus' head that read "King of the Jews" marked him as someone who was crucified as a challenger to the power of Caesar.

But why is it in the Apostles creed? Why not simply state that Jesus was executed? Why specify the form of execution? First, it grounds the creed in the actual history, for the specific form of execution was crucifixion. Second, it inevitably acknowledges that, by virtues of his claims to lordship, Jesus did oppose Caesar and his empire.

Third, and I think the hardest for us to comprehend, is that this affirmation lifts Jesus up as having suffered the most humiliating and shameful possible death. Crucifixion was so horrible and shameful a death that it couldn't even be mentioned in polite company. For a culture built upon the acquisition of honor and the avoidance of shame, this aspect of crucifixion might well have been the most awful in the eyes of many.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Jesus was born in the humblest of circumstances and would, one day, be humiliated on a cross. Now, being humble . . . that is a word I can deal with. I have a much harder time with “humiliated.” Being humble just seems so Christian and such a nice thing to be. (I guess I could even take pride in my humbleness!??) You might begin by discussing your own reaction to being “humble” v. being “humiliated.” Perhaps the difference is this. Being humble is something I can try to do for myself. Being humiliated is something done to me by others. Jesus was both humble and humiliated. He took the form of a slave upon himself. The humiliation of the cross was inflicted on him by others. Have there ever been times in your own life when you were humiliated for the benefit of others? Were you humiliated willingly? How did it make you feel? Why is it so hard for us?
2. What does our difficulty with being humiliated have to do with our lives as Christians? Many Christians seem focused only on enjoying the benefits of Jesus’ suffering, forgetting that we are called to share in his suffering. Sharing in Christ’s suffering is a recurring theme throughout the New Testament. Surely, there are plenty of opportunities in life to suffer for the benefit of others, but the question that haunts me is whether I ever really do it – or if I do, do I embrace some sort of martyr complex! Consider areas in our lives where we suffer and sacrifice for others. Parents sacrifice for their children. But where else?

Memory Verse of the Week

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

John 15:12-13

On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus tried to help his disciples see the path ahead and that this path, as difficult as it would be, was the path of true love and faithfulness.

Scott’s 11:00 Class in Festival Hall

The Rise of Christianity

How the obscure, marginal Jesus movement became the dominant religious force in the western world in a few centuries.

Mar 20 – The Fourth Generation: From Church to Christendom

Coming soon in this class: Who Will Be Saved?

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

In God’s Time: The Bible and the Future

We meet at 11:45 in room 127 every Tuesday. This week we continue our discussion of Revelation. Join us whenever you can.

Offering Christ: a study in the book of Acts

Scott’s Monday evening class, beginning Mar 28, 6:45 in Piro Hall

Luke set out to write an “orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us . . . so that you may know the truth.” His work encompasses two NT books: the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. In the book of Acts, Luke tells the story of Christianity in the first decades after Jesus’ resurrection. What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? What constitutes a life of discipleship? How should the work of Jesus’ followers move forward? What is their message? How did Jesus’ followers grow from a small group of persecuted followers to a movement that spread across the Roman Empire? In this eight-week class, we’ll see this tense story of God’s work to bring about a new world, through the work of a renewed people empowered by God’s Holy Spirit.

To register go to: http://www.standrewumc.org/ministries/learning/bible_academy/