

Freedom Not to Crucify

Text: John 12:12-19

Hymn: "All Glory, Laud, and Honor" (*LSB* 442)

By Palm Sunday they are already beginning to crucify Jesus. You might not think of it that way because no one has driven nails into His hands or feet yet. But the process is already under way. We shouldn't be deceived by the crowds' spirited enthusiasm and apparent support at this juncture. After all, moods swing quickly.

Not so much the mood or disposition of the crowd around Jesus, what's notable is how they completely isolate Jesus. They have isolated and made him out to be the object of their desires, their hopes, their wishes. You've heard the old saying, "It's lonely at the top." It's lonely at the top of that donkey. Jesus is sitting up there all alone, where he has become the object of a lot of expectations of a lot of different people. As you know, he will become later the object of their derision, their disappointment. The key thing, though, is he has been made into an object onto which they are projecting all of their feelings, their desires, and later their anger.

This is how you begin to crucify someone. You single someone out and you make them the focal point for some wish, some hope that you have. And when they cannot or will not fulfill those desires of yours, you finish the job with nails.

I think Jesus is every bit as isolated, sitting there on top of the donkey, amidst their cheers, as he will be later on the cross, amidst their jeers. All that He is to them, all that He has become to them, is what they want out of him. And so they may shout, "Hosanna," or they may cry, "Crucify," at a deeper level it's the same thing. Or, you could say one kind leads to another.

This is how people treat people. The account of our Lord's Passion is a template given to help us understand how things work in the world around us. This is the way in which a crucifying society operates. Every society is a crucifying society. We crucify one another. If not literally, figuratively in a million other ways.

In this context, I came across a quote the other day: Everyone in the world is Christ. And everyone is crucified. And I think that in the way the person meant it, it is very true. But there is also another side to that. If all are Christ, and all are crucified, it's also true that all are Pilate or Caiaphas or Judas. We are crucifiers as well as crucified. This is what we do. We do unto others as we would not have done unto us.

Surprisingly, the one character in the Passion narrative who at least for a moment comes to recognize just how all alone Jesus is and what has been made of him is Pontius Pilate. Maybe that's because Pilate is also isolated in a way. It's lonely at the top. There is some sense in which Pilate can momentarily commiserate with the position Jesus is. So, Pilate utters that infamous remark, which reveals this understanding. Pilate drags Jesus out after He's been beaten and abused and Pilate says, "Behold, the man!" As if to say to the crowds, "Look at this man standing here, this bloodied, bruised man. He's a man. He's a human being. He is more than or should be seen as more than the object of your desires or the object of your frustrations now or your envy. He's a human being, for heaven's sakes." So Pilate pleads with them and urges them to recognize this. But they don't see it. Jesus' humanity at that moment is invisible to them. They are willfully and deliberately blind. They do not see standing before them a man. They see rather an object upon which they have projected

their expectations. He is a lamb led to the slaughter. And a lamb, of course, is something less than a man.

It's significant, I think, that in the very beginning of the Gospel according to St. John, John the Baptist points to Jesus and says, "Behold"—notice you have that same "behold" introduction—"Behold the Lamb of God." And then at the other end of St. John's Gospel you have Pontius Pilate saying, 'Behold the man.' And in some sense Pilate is more right than John the Baptist. Behold the man. This is not an animal. This is not a lamb that you can cavalierly kill and butcher.

So Pilate issues this invitation to the crowd. He urges them to recognize the humanity of Jesus as he stands there before them. And that invitation, by way of the Holy Scriptures, is extended to you and me. You and I are invited to see the humanity not only of Jesus but, by extension to our crucifying society, "Behold every man." Behold the Christ in every person. Open your eyes and see how we crucify. See how we take people and isolate them and turn them into the objects of our own desires and in the process blind ourselves to the reality of their humanity. They're like furniture, to give us what we want until they don't; then leave them on the curb for bulk trash.

So, why? Why show us these things, Holy Spirit? You can't keep from being crucified. You cannot keep yourself in this world from ever suffering as a victim, from ever suffering the unkindness or abuse of others when it's directed towards you. Because you don't control others. But you can keep yourself from doing it to others. You can choose not to crucify. If everyone made that choice, of course, then no one would be crucified. And this is not a thing, I'm afraid, that we should expect this side of the resurrection. But you most certainly can choose not to crucify another.

And the Passion of our Lord is supposed to have this effect on us. If you stop to think about it, the account of Jesus' suffering and death is presented to us in such a way that it has this air of inevitability. As the story unfolds, you know it's just got to be this way. And in a way it is inevitable. This is how it all happened. But the story is told to us so as to prevent the inevitable from endlessly recurring or at the very least to show us that in Christ we have a choice. It's like the parable of the wicked tenants. Jesus tells his enemies about the tenants and how they kill the landlord's son. But Jesus' enemies don't have to do that. The end part of the parable hasn't come off yet. They could resist the temptation. They don't, but there's this possibility at least of doing otherwise.

I think we're supposed to hear the Passion narrative the way the Jewish leaders were supposed to hear the parable that Jesus told. Every "Behold the man" moment is this opportunity to call a halt to the grim proceedings in which we're involved. To crucify another, any other, is terribly wrong. That doesn't sound terribly controversial; everyone here would say and concede it is wrong to crucify in whatever manner we do it.

But then why does it keep happening? In terms of how it happens, there is this overlooking of the humanity of the one on whom you have fixed and focused your desires. It's sort of a psychological trick we play on ourselves. To crucify another human being is, of course, wrong, but to crucify an object is easier to pull off. Which is why, as I said at the beginning, we should think of the crucifixion as a process. First you isolate and objectify this person and then in time you go on to crucify him.

But because it is a drawn-out process, there is time and opportunity to arrest the progress of it. We do not have to crucify one another. We often do, but it's not inevitable. We can see and recognize the humanity of others. Behold the man! Behold

every man! Pilate's famous line is thrown out to us sort of like a fishing line, and in Pilate's time no one bites. But it's not inevitable that no one ever will. Seeing what happens to Jesus is meant to open our eyes so that the same process doesn't necessarily have to repeat itself endlessly. We don't have to crucify.

You won't be able to keep others from dragging you to Calvary in some way but you can keep from driving nails into the hands and feet of others. And the key might be to catch the process early. To see and to recognize what goes on when you isolate someone and make them the object of your needs and to realize that that actually strips them of their humanity. It makes them into an unperson, a gumball machine. And we need to recognize this especially at the beginning of the whole process, when our expectations are still high, when our enthusiasm is still great, that somehow what's going on here is lurching toward crucifixion, because eventually we find out who can meet all of our desires, who can fulfill all of our needs, and when they don't, they will be met with our frustrations, our disappointment, and perhaps even our wrath and fury, all because of how it all started. We made them into object. And now that they have been made into objects, they can be crucified in whatever way we imagine.

If early on we could see that this person here is a person in his or her own right, and maybe she doesn't want to be just what I want her to be, and maybe he has thoughts and feelings of his own and maybe I should let her become what she has it in mind to become and not set her up on the mantel or place him up on a pedestal or make anyone ride that donkey to doom.

We need Jesus, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, for this: We need Jesus to show us, to reveal to us the humanity in others by way and through His own revealed

humanity. "Behold the man." Behold every man who has been set up there on the platform as an object, who has been placed upon the donkey. And men ought not be crucified. They ought not be slaughtered like hogs or lambs. They are not to be treated as though they are there to satisfy your own appetite and desires. To see the man, to recognize the person that inheres within that object of your desires and whims, is to see what ought not be done.

We need Jesus to show us through the inhumanity of man towards man which we see exhibited around us all the time in the broader world and in our everyday lives. We need Jesus to show us through, sadly, the many victims who suffer from that inhumane treatment the very humanity we need to look for and find in others so that we don't keep crucifying one another. We need Jesus for when we fail, for when we go too far, for when we fail to stop the process in time, to appeal to the Father on the basis of His own crucified body. And, finally, we need Jesus to raise the dead, to raise not only us but those whom we have crucified because that is certainly something we cannot do. We can not kill, we can not crucify, but we cannot raise the victims who have been crucified.

In going to the Cross, Jesus opens our eyes to the humanity of others. May our eyes continue to be opened as we move through this week, Holy Week, to the cross and the resurrection.

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