

March 30, 2018
Sermon Manuscript
Good Friday

2 Corinthians 5:21

²¹For our sake (God) made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

How Jesus became our Shame (2 Cor 5:21)

Today I appointed a single verse for our second lesson, where Paul writes, “²¹For our sake (God) made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God,” because I hope to help us understand what this means, at least in part. I want to consider how God used the cross to make Jesus to be sin. And to do this I will enlist the help of Fleming Rutledge, a pastor and theologian who has written a marvelous book on the crucifixion.¹

You see, the thing about crucifixion is that it was assuredly *worse* than any of us are presently capable of fully imagining, but perhaps not for reasons you think. In his 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ* Mel Gibson tried to help us appreciate the excruciating pain Jesus would’ve endured in being put to death in this way. But it is notable that the 4 Gospels writers make little mention about the physical suffering of Jesus. And Rutledge suggests this is because these writers want our focus to be elsewhere, not that the Jesus’ physical suffering is to be ignored, but what made crucifixion an exceedingly brutal form of execution is the way it was designed to impose rejection and shame upon the offender. And this – the shame of crucifixion – is a significance that is lost on many of us for whom the cross has become so familiar, as something we wear around our necks or that adorns our churches. #

In recent decades it has become somewhat popular to analogize crucifixion to the American electric chair. But there are key differences that frankly make crucifixion an exponentially worse punishment to impose on someone. Now, please don’t mistake what I’m about to say as a defense of the death penalty; it is certainly not that. But the electric chair is at least *supposed* to be a humane and quick means of execution; the offender is usually given a mask or hood to preserve some level of their dignity; and these executions are performed out of the public view.

And in all of these ways the electric chair contrasts with crucifixion, which was very intentionally a public affair. As scholar Joel Green explains, the Romans would position their crucifixions “at a major crossroads or on a well-trafficked artery”. But those crucified would also typically be devoid of clothing; the Romans crucified people naked! Now, I know Jesus is often depicted with a loin cloth of sorts to cover his genitals, but I’m just here to tell you that’s likely not how it went down.

And the Romans didn’t provide a hood, either. In fact, today we read Isaiah’s prophesy about Jesus in 53:2-3 that the messiah would have “no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.” Many have concluded this means Jesus was just not a very attractive guy in

¹ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*, Eerdmans: 2015.

regular life, but some have instead suggested this is a prophesy about his brutal appearance during the crucifixion;. I'm not sure any of us can imagine, or would want to imagine, what the face of a man dying this way would look like. No wonder Cicero called it the supreme penalty, exceeding burning and decapitation in gruesomeness: at least the gruesomeness of decapitation occurs after the offender has already died.

A further way that crucifixion was different from the electric chair is that a crucified person was forced to be their own executioner. You see, the way someone ultimately died of crucifixion was by suffocating, because the weight of their own body would prevent what we call passive exhalation. So they would have to push up to be able to exhale, meaning they would eventually have to decide when to give up on living.

And, you see, all of this – the publicness, the nakedness, the exposed face, and so on – these methods were intended by the Romans to optimize – and maximize – the experience of ridicule & shame for those being crucified.

So Roman crucifixion was different *and worse* than the American electric chair in many ways. In fact, about the only similarity between these forms of execution is both societies reserve them for the lowest classes. Rutledge points out that even if OJ Simpson had been convicted there's no way our society would've sentenced him to death, simply because of his wealth and celebrity. Well, similarly Roman citizens were never crucified and the rich always managed to avoid it. It was a slave's death. Like the tens of millions of Africans who died in the hull of slave ships on the Atlantic, to be crucified meant society had deemed you not fit to live. In fact, that was precisely the point.

The "Romans used crucifixion expressly for eliminating victims from consideration as members of the human race; (and) the specific role of the passerby was to exacerbate the dehumanization and degradation of the person who had been thus designated to be a spectacle."

And there are further elements of Jesus' crucifixion that give us a sense of how degrading it was. We know of his identity as messiah was mocked by giving him a purple robe, a mock scepter (Mt 27:29), and a crown of thorns; and that he was jeered at. Although, we may not have considered the sexual shaming his nakedness would've provoked, one can only imagine the jeers uncircumcised Romans would lob at a Jew whose circumcision was on display.

So is it really any wonder that Deuteronomy 21 singles out those who are put to death on a tree as specifically "cursed" (v 23) or forsaken by God. Is it any wonder that Jesus would've struggled to feel or hear God during this experience, causing him to cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ##

And yet, the reason Jesus took all of this on is because this is how he identified with us – with humankind – in our sinfulness. The reason Jesus cooperated – and even submitted – to his father's will by taking on shame and allowing himself to become less-than-human scum is because such shame and degradation is the fruit of sin. The shame you and I experience is a either a result of sin we commit, others sinning against us, and we also have inflicted shame upon others by sinning against them. Shame occurs when we allow those things to define us, to impact our identity or sense of worth.

So I want to ask you: what are you carrying around shame from? What in our lives do we feel shame about? Are there things we have done which we allow to inform how we see ourselves as a person – perhaps at some point we failed to live up to a commitment or promise; or perhaps we have

habitually struggled with a behavior that we know is wrong; or perhaps it was just *one* choice or decision we made long ago but that we just *can't* take back. Or maybe we've been shamed by someone else – maybe we've experienced someone objectifying us or condemned us for something we did or some standard we didn't live up to or quite literally saying to us: "shame on you".

As I once heard Bishop Mark Lawrence say, "My lord took the shame I *do* deserve and the shame I *don't*." In going to the cross, Jesus was confronting on the shame from sin we commit ourselves or sin others commit against us and saying "put it on me! I'll take it!". And whether we have experienced shame of abandonment, or sexual shame, or being treated as worthless, Jesus has experienced it.

The good news today is that Jesus subjected himself to the shame of sin, so that it might not rule us; in order that we would derive our identity not from what we have done or not done, but in being a beloved child of God, in what he has done for us.

And the resurrection that we'll celebrate in a few days means that just as shame did not have the final word on Jesus, our shame will no longer need to define us if we will live by faith forgiveness is our and the Lord invites us to walk in that new identity we've been given as a cherished child of God.

So today I invite you to receive that in faith; to believe it. Jesus died for you – he became sin – to take on your shame. Will you hand that shame over to him?

Amen.