

## **“The Saddest Day in History”**

**John 19:17-24**

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Do you recall the saddest day of your life? Some can while others struggle because they have several from which to choose. I suspect most of us would list the death of family members. I would.

When I read our text for today, I was overwhelmed with sadness. The young man that came to preach good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind and liberation for the oppressed was being crucified. His message was rejected by the religious authorities and they did what leaders naturally do when they are threatened, silence the messenger by any means. Follow along as I read this portion of the Passion story.

*“Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). Here they crucified him and with him two others, one on each side and Jesus in the middle”* John 19:17-18.

I cannot imagine how difficult this must have been. Jesus was already in great pain from the whipping he received and now he had to carry a heavy cross in his weakened condition. I marvel at his ability to do this purely from a physical standpoint and to be candid with you, I think the emotional and spiritual agony he was suffering was even greater.

What is the heaviest load you are carrying now? How well are you carrying it? Do you need help carrying your cross? Jesus did. Mark tells us that Simon was compelled to assist Jesus because his load was too heavy for him to shoulder. Perhaps yours is, too, and it is time for you to reach out for help. I hope you will. Let the Lord, your family, friends, wise counselors and this loving church help you carry your load. You will be glad you did.

**“Carrying his own cross, he went to the place of the skull.”** Discipleship was redefined that day, wasn't it? Watching from a distance, the disciples had to recall Jesus' words, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whosoever loses his life for me and the Gospel will save it” Mark 8:34-35. I don't think the disciples had ever understood, much less witnessed this level of commitment. It would change their lives forever.

**“Carrying his own cross, he went to the place of the skull.”** I'm embarrassed at our feeble attempts to define discipleship. We do our best to take out the cross or anything that resembles it. Bonhoeffer said we want a “crossless Christianity.” He was right, wasn't he?

*“Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read, ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.’ Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city and the sign was **written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek.** The Chief Priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, ‘Do not write “The King of the Jews,” but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews.’ Pilate answered, ‘What I have written, I have written’”* John 19:19-22.

Pilate seemed adamant about two things, not changing his mind and making sure everyone that passed by knew who this man was and why he was dying. He wanted the inscription printed in the language of the government, culture and religious community.

Perhaps there is a lesson here for us, too. We need to make sure that everyone knows who Jesus was and why he died. It is the least we can do to express our gratitude for his unspeakable sacrifice.

During Sunday School last week, Kathy Dobbins led a discussion with interested participants on Mel Gibson's movie, “The Passion of the Christ.” One person shared with us that her college age daughter went to see the film with two friends that are not Christians. The question they asked after the movie was, “Why was Jesus treated so cruelly and crucified?”

Many in our country are asking this very question because of all the attention this movie has received. Whether you see the movie or not, I hope you are attentive to the inquiries of those who do and provide answers to their questions.

*“When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. ‘Let’s not tear it,’ they said to one another. **‘Let’s decide by lot who will get it’**”* John 19:23-24a.

What does Jesus have that you need? Jesus definitely had some things that these soldiers needed; however, they took the wrong things from the cross. Soldiers that were unlucky enough to draw this duty were rewarded by taking home the clothing of the criminals they executed. Dividing up Jesus’ clothing was normal. What was so sad, though, is that they could have taken so much more away from that cross.

They walked away from gifts that he was willing to give them that could have changed their lives forever, abundant and eternal life. From this beaten and maligned man they could have received life with meaning, purpose, guidance, direction, peace, security, strength, courage, confidence, dignity and forgiveness. If only they could have talked to the woman with the issue of the blood that touched the hem of his garment. Perhaps she could have convinced them that they were focusing on the wrong thing. It was not the clothing they needed from him, but his transforming love and power. They were content to walk away with so little. How sad. I hope you will not make the same mistake today.

*“This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled which said, ‘They divided my garments among them and **cast lots for my clothing.**’ **So this is what the soldiers did**”* John 19:24b.

The soldiers had a problem that needed to be solved. There were four of them, yet Jesus had five pieces of clothing. Would they rip the seamless tunic into four equal pieces, destroying its value? They decided against this, deciding instead to gamble for it, thus leaving it in tact.

Do you know what this meant? They were playing games at the foot of the cross. How did Jesus feel when he looked down upon them? I can only imagine.

I have been pastoring churches for thirty four and one-half years. I never cease to be amazed at what upsets people. Many times, it has to do with something trivial. I don’t doubt that it is important to them, but in the larger scheme of things, it is not very important. In a world filled with wars, rumors of wars, violence, injustice, prejudice, ignorance, disease, abuse, exploitation and greed, some people still choose to focus upon their pet peeves or selfish desires. How tragic.

In Gibson’s movie, did you watch the soldiers that were gambling for Jesus’ clothes? At what were they looking? Where was their attention? Was it on him or those that were in agony over his crucifixion? No. Their eyes were fastened solely upon those dice. They were playing games at the foot of the cross and were not going to be distracted by anyone in need, especially Jesus. God help us never to be this selfish, insensitive and unfocused. If we are, it will be one of the saddest days in our church’s history.