

Isaiah 50:4-9  
Mark 15:16-20

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A couple of years ago I was in downtown Missoula, Montana along the Clark Fork River watching kayakers play in the waves. A man walked up to me. Before he spoke, I knew he was a Californian. The combination of his mostly unbuttoned shirt, his commercially tanned complexion, frosted hair and designer flip-flops gave him away. I decided to amuse myself by making conversation with this comically out of place figure. I asked him where he was from. He responded, "Oh, I'm from *here*". I decided to indulge him. "So, how long have you lived here?" I asked. He said he had been in the area for a while. I pressed him for a while, but eventually gave up my line of questioning. Perhaps feeling that he had dodged the bullet, Mr. Malibu tried to play it cool by making further conversation. He pointed to where he was standing and said, "So, this is Missoula, right?" I nodded. Then he pointed over the distant mountains and said, "so, over there is Montana?" This elicited stifled snickering from the eavesdropping crowd of Missourians standing around us. I informed him that Missoula was a city *inside* the *state* of Montana. He looked thoroughly confused. I asked again, "so, how long did you say you've lived here?"

Montana and Nashville are alike in at least one way. Far more people claim to be from them than actually are from them. They are places people move to for particular reasons, but of course, moving to them has become a cliché. Whether one moves to Montana for the skiing or to Nashville to make it as a singer, the first order of business is to try to pass as a local. I spent six months avoiding certain local names until I could figure out how to pronounce them, like Demonbreun. Part of the fun for those of us who have made it is to watch the new ones try, because it's at the very moment they think they are blending in that they are the funniest.

Often this is relatively benign teasing, but I am concerned with why we enjoy it so much. I suspect that in this process, we take some pleasure in knowing that we are on the inside of something, and not just anything, but something others are trying to get into. We are inside, they are outside, and they are going to have to amuse us for a while before we let them in, right? We do this in all sorts of circumstances. We mess with the new person at work just like we messed with the new kids in school. Sometimes it is more serious, though, it's not always just fun and games. We make it pretty hard for people to come to our country, for instance. It takes a set of steps to become a citizen of this country, or even to become a legal alien here. Now this isn't for our amusement, there need to be standards for immigration for the security of our nation. All the same, it's a game with rules that we, the insiders, set for the outsiders.

As you know, throughout Lent we are focusing on Jesus' experience on Good Friday as told by the evangelist Mark. Today we have a familiar and difficult passage, the beating and mockery of Jesus by the Roman soldiers. Mark relates this story as a point of irony. Mark assumes that his audience sees the actions of the soldiers as

especially offensive because the mockery is blasphemously close to what we regard as the truth. We look at the soldiers in disgust because we know something that they do not know. We know about the resurrection and they do not. They call Jesus a king; they go out of their way to dress this poor, beaten man in royal clothes. They even create an instrument of torture out of a symbol of royalty, the crown of thorns.

The impact of this story is not just the ironic symbolism, but also its excess. Presumably it took some work, perhaps even some bloody fingers to twist that crown of thorns. We suppose they ruined an expensive purple cloth just to laugh at the idea of this prisoner wearing it. They went to a great deal of effort to demonstrate how completely Jesus was *not* a king by dressing him up and bowing before him as if he was one. Why would they do this? Were they especially evil people? Perhaps that is the case, but I think it is more valuable to assume that these men were not so different from us.

Recall that Jesus endured this affliction while the murderer Barabbas went free. Barabbas, Mark says, committed murder during the insurrection. Barabbas it seems was among those who engaged in what we would now call terrorist attacks against the state. He was a political revolutionary. Recall that Jesus' threat to the Romans was cast in a similar way. Calling him the King of the Jews implies that he intended a political revolution to establish his power, and it was of this attempted insurrection that he was convicted.

This might enlighten the excesses of the soldiers. They must have seen their fellow soldiers die, killed by these insurrections. Perhaps they had friends killed by zealot attacks in crowded places. Perhaps some of them had friends killed by Barabbas, the man who had just gone free. Each revolutionary leader who stirred up the people only brought bloodshed to both sides.

So they took their anger out on Jesus. After all, he was in the same business as Barabbas, right? Punish the one in custody for the crimes of the one who got away. I think that these soldiers had seen too much death and they took it out on this supposed revolutionary figure who they presumed intended to kill them and their comrades in the street.

If they knew the story like we know it, I suspect they would have chosen a different part in it. We look at Jesus and see a King who did not come to establish a kingdom through force but rather through the gospel. The soldiers saw another aspiring revolutionary, a murderer, a terrorist. Those soldiers certainly did not anticipate that their actions would be judged by followers of this man two millennia in the future. Like the rest of us, they made a decision based on limited information with more concern for the mob than for the man before them.

Often we think of the Church as existing in a place that is not its own. We are in the world but not of it, right? It's in the Bible. We are strangers and sojourners in this

land. In that way, we might want to identify with Jesus in this story, or perhaps with my Californian friend, as those outsiders being misunderstood and abused. Certainly the Church ought to feel out of place in the world, or else it is not being the Church! However, I think we have to be very careful about identifying ourselves with Jesus in any story, especially when that story takes place on Good Friday. As an American Religious Historian, I assure you that majority white Protestant churches in this country have particular trouble claiming to be outside the societal majority. For most of American history, white Protestants have made the rules by which everyone else in this country has had to play.

So, when we think about what it means to be the Church in connection to this story, it is time that we start thinking about the cultural outsiders we encounter everyday. Perhaps they are refugees from a war-torn place trying to make a life in this city. Perhaps they do not speak our language. Perhaps they are mentally ill, without family or financial assistance, and so they find themselves on the streets of a different town every few months.

How do we relate to these people? Do we see them as dangerous? As potential criminals? Perhaps we see them as attacking our language or culture? As living off our already stretched too thin resources. Perhaps, they are simply inconvenient, the people who take too long in front of us in line because they speak only in broken English. How must the Church interact with these people?

This story presents two models of interaction. The soldiers reacted to a threat. They mocked and tortured Jesus, a man we now know to have been innocent, because they thought he was as deserving a target as that other terrorist Barabbas. One criminal replaced by another *potential* criminal. They did what they did in the name of safety and security, perhaps even in the name of peace. They did what was smart. What could this one man's life be worth in comparison to national security, security that protected the Jews and the Romans? These insurrectionists came and went; surely no one would remember his name in a year. So they made an example out of Jesus. The man who had triumphantly entered Jerusalem just a few days prior was humiliated and publicly executed. A message was sent to the masses, crisis was averted and peace was maintained.

On the other hand, we can encounter others with the same loving compassion that we see modeled in Jesus. In this story Mark tells us how God in human flesh did nothing in the face of gross abuse, mockery, blasphemy. He had the resources to defend himself, but he endured. When we encounter cultural outsiders, people who are scary to us for one reason or another, we face a choice between the bizarre, illogical vulnerability of Jesus and the reasonable self-preservation of the Roman soldiers. The Romans acted strategically, but the Church must act in love and compassion. If we are to be the Church in the world, then we are called to live dangerously. We are given the choice between being the Church and being safe. No longer can the Church enjoy safety at the expense

of the “least of these”. Let us put away our fear and act with love, compassion and mercy toward those who need these the most.

**Mark 15:16-20**

And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters), and they called together the whole battalion. And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him. And they began to salute him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they were striking his head with a reed and spitting on him and kneeling down in homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him.