

“Jesus’ Finest Hour”

Luke 23:33-46

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Communion Devotion

When I decided upon the title of the sermon for today’s message, I immediately thought of the speech British Prime Minister Winston Churchill delivered to the House of Commons of the Parliament of the United Kingdom on June 18, 1940. He had been in office only a few weeks and was overwhelmed by the early successes Germany was having at the beginning of WW II.

Between May 13 and June 18, Churchill delivered three speeches to the House of Commons about the war. He knew Hitler would soon turn his attention to Great Britain and the entire British Empire. To prepare his people, Churchill declared:

“The Battle of Britain is about to begin. Hitler knows he will have to break us in this island or lose the war. If we stand up to him, all Europe may be freed and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands.

But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new and dark age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves, that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, ‘This was their finest hour.’”

I don’t know if it is even possible to determine Jesus’ finest hour. There are many from which to choose. I have to believe, though, the way he handled his arrest and crucifixion makes the list.

After Jesus was arrested by the Roman authorities, he was handed over to the religious leaders who had been plotting his death for months, if not years. They were upset because Jesus exposed their hypocrisy and insincerity.

Jesus' attempts to get them to repent and to realign their values and priorities were met with great resistance. They were far more interested in feeding their egos and lining their pockets than being an advocate for the victims of injustice and a friend to the forgotten.

Jesus' insistence they value serving over being served and sacrifice over self-indulgence fell on deaf ears. They were far more concerned with maintaining their lavish lifestyles than meeting the needs of the people God called them to lead and serve, which is why they had to silence the prophetic voice of Jesus.

When these religious authorities finally had Jesus in their grasp, their anger turned to rage. Words cannot adequately describe what they did to Jesus or had done to him by the Romans.

Luke pulls back the curtain and describes what he learned by listening to people who were there. To sum it up, Jesus was treated like, and probably worse than, the dangerous and despised criminals who were crucified with him.

Luke tells us Jesus was beaten, tortured, humiliated, mocked, sneered at, insulted and falsely accused. No one came to his defense, not even one of his beloved and chosen disciples who knew he was innocent.

Can you imagine how lonely, dejected and disappointed Jesus felt while hanging on that cross? Every lesson he taught and life he touched seemed to be for naught. Here he was in his final hours all alone in a dark and scary world.

So, how did Jesus die? Bitter? Angry? Cynical? Declaring his innocence? Lashing out at those who mistreated him?

Listen to the first words of Jesus on the cross mentioned by Luke. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34a)

This prayer haunts me from time to time. Often, when I try to justify my impulsive reaction to someone who has hurt me, a response that usually makes a bad situation worse, this prayer Jesus prayed on behalf of his tormentors gets in my way. It has spoiled many pity-parties and made my childish tirades look so foolish.

Who are the people Jesus included in this prayer? Most scholars believe this request for forgiveness included not only Jesus' disciples, but the Roman officials who carried out the crucifixion and the religious leaders who orchestrated it. Jesus excluded no one, which influenced Stephen, the first Christian martyr, to do the same.

How could Jesus do this? How could he even utter these words?

Based upon what he taught throughout his ministry, how could he not? Five times in Luke's gospel, Jesus instructed his disciples to forgive their enemies.

"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hurt you, bless those who curse you and pray for those who mistreat you." (Luke 6:27-28)

I suppose Jesus really believed what he taught, didn't he?

The question is, do we?

Why is forgiveness such an important part of our faith, both granting it and receiving it? Genuine forgiveness brings the best out of everyone. It makes hope visible in ways nothing else can.

Forgiveness compels us to admit that all of us are capable of hurting others and even ourselves. It forces us to look at the devastating consequences of our mistakes, to acknowledge the pain we have caused and to take ownership of what we have done.

It inspires and motivates us to make changes in our attitude, values, priorities and behavior. It reminds us of the importance of keeping promises and the necessity of asking others to hold us accountable.

The redemptive power of love provides hope and healing for both the victim and the oppressor. It tears down walls of suspicion and hate and builds bridges of goodwill and understanding. It opens the door that leads to reconciliation and recovery.

Corrie ten Boom and her family were Dutch Christians who helped many Jews escape the Holocaust of WW II. When their home was invaded after an informant tipped off the Nazis of their activities, the family was imprisoned. Corrie's sister, Betsie, and her father, Casper, died in captivity.

When a guard once told Corrie the only way to survive in a horrible place like a concentration camp was to hate, it is reported she replied, "Sir, hatred will put me in a prison far worse than this."

I believe Corrie knew about the transforming and redeeming power of love and the value of forgiveness. Her life during and after her imprisonment certainly reflected the heart and nature of Christ.

After Jesus took his final breath and died on that old, rugged cross, what does Luke share with his readers? One of the soldiers standing near the cross who was charged with carrying out Jesus' execution praised God and said, "Surely, this was a righteous man."

I believe that centurion would tell us this was Jesus' finest hour.

Does your finest hour look anything like this?