

“Courage Under Fire”

John 18:1-11

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“The last miracle Jesus performed healed a wound caused by one of his own disciples.” Over twenty years ago, I heard Dr. Timothy George, Dean of the Beeson Divinity School at Samford, make that statement, and I have never forgotten it. It has had a profound impact upon me as a person and a minister.

Dr. George was referring to the miracle Jesus performed the night he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. When Simon Peter cut off the ear of Malchus, the high priest’s servant, Jesus healed the wound. Before I talk more about this, let me set the stage for this miracle.

This story occurred on Thursday of Holy Week. Holy Week begins with the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on what we now refer to as Palm Sunday. For Jesus and his friends, it was the beginning of Passover, a time to remember and celebrate the release of the ancient Jews from Egyptian captivity.

Throughout the week, Jesus interacted with the religious leaders, and most of the encounters were unpleasant. He began the week by going into the temple, running out the moneychangers who were exploiting the pilgrims who had come to worship.

As the week progressed, Jesus told parables which indicted the religious leaders for their hypocrisy and self-indulgence. He accused them of abusing their power and influence by robbing widows and catering to the rich. He told his followers not all religious people were good people, and they should not be deceived by them.

By Thursday, the authorities were ready to take action. Jesus had to be silenced, and the best way to do it was to have him arrested him for blasphemy and disturbing the peace. This is where our text begins.

After Jesus met with his disciples in the Upper Room where he shared a meal with them and washed their feet out of loving humility, he led them to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray.

Even though it was night time, the full Passover moon provided plenty of light for them to make this short journey.

They passed through the Kidron Valley which separated the eastern part of the city from the Mount of Olives. I am confident Jesus paused as he walked over the brook and looked down at the water below. It had to be red from the blood of the thousands of lambs that had been slain that day in the temple. The blood from those sacrifices flowed out of the temple into the brook which ran through the KIDRON VALLEY. Surely, Jesus paused and reflected upon his own blood which would be flowing down a cross in just a matter of hours.

I don't know how long Jesus and his disciples had been in the garden praying when Judas arrived. You recall he left the meal earlier to accept the authorities' bribe for telling them where Jesus was. Thirty pieces of silver was his bounty, which he would later return before hanging himself for doing something so terrible.

Along with Judas was a contingent of Jewish authorities and Roman soldiers. It appears there was anywhere between two and six hundred soldiers carrying torches, lanterns and weapons. It was obvious they believed Jesus would run and hide from them, and they would have to hunt for him in places where moonlight could not penetrate. How ironic they came looking for the "light of the world" with their puny artificial lights!

It was also obvious the authorities came to arrest Jesus when almost everyone in Jerusalem was bedded down for the night. Jesus was quite popular with the common folk, and in all likelihood, they would have offered resistance had Jesus been arrested in broad daylight. There was no chance of this happening under the cover of darkness.

To the authorities' surprise, however, Jesus approached them. "Who is it you want?" he asked, reminiscent of the first question he asked the first disciples who followed him. "Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "I am he," Jesus said, again revealing himself to be the incarnate Logos of God.

Upon hearing this, the soldiers fell to the ground, the conventional response when in the presence of a deity. It seems the authorities were prepared to handle anything that night, except the honesty, courage and boldness of Jesus.

Jesus repeated the question, this time making a plea for the authorities to let his disciples go. He did not use the word, disciple, however. Instead, he merely called them "men," as a way of protecting them by separating them from him and his public ministry. This does not surprise me; after all, he said he would lay down his life for his sheep (10:11, 15).

At this point, Simon Peter drew his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. Peter was not supposed to have this weapon, though, for it was unlawful for anyone other than the authorities to have weapons in Jerusalem during Passover. With over 250,000 pilgrims there to observe Passover, extreme measures were taken to keep down the possibility of insurrection and violence.

Immediately after Peter struck the high priest's servant, Jesus rebuked him. "Put your sword away," Jesus quickly told Peter to let him know who was in control of the events that night. "Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" Jesus asked.

According to Luke's account of this incident, Jesus bent down, picked up the man's ear and reattached it. I can only imagine what a dramatic moment that must have been.

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For me, what was most significant about this miracle was not that Jesus healed the wound of an enemy while under great stress, but that he healed a wound caused by one of his own followers. By the way, it was not just any disciple, but a leader from his inner circle.

You know how this speaks to me? **It tells me Christians are just as capable of hurting others as those who do not follow Jesus.**

Peter was as close to Jesus as anyone. He was in the audience the day Jesus talked about loving your enemies and praying for those who hurt you. I am confident the two of them had a lot of camp fire talks about this ethic of love and Jesus' non-violent resistance to evil. Yet, when the authorities came for Jesus, Peter pulled his sword.

Scholars are confident Peter was not aiming for this man's ear. He was aiming for his neck in order to kill him.

I wish I could say Peter's behavior is uncommon, but I don't think it is. Believers are as capable of hurting others as those who do not believe in Jesus, and their wrath can be directed toward strangers, dear friends or close family members.

How do believers hurt others? There is a wide variety of ways. Sometimes we hurt others with words by saying things which are insulting, humiliating or not true.

We hurt others by ignoring them and acting as if they don't exist, or at least don't matter.

We hurt people by trying to manipulate or control them so we can selfishly use them.

We hurt people when we become violent and inflict bodily harm upon them as Peter did that dreadful night when he attacked Malchus. Far too often, this occurs in the home.

Each year, Kentucky issues almost 25,000 protective orders to keep abusers at bay. Many of these abusers are the husbands, former husbands and boyfriends of the women who seek protection.

Every fifteen seconds, a woman is battered in America. If you came to Sunday school this morning, before you leave church today over 500 women will have been abused.

Why does abuse occur at this alarming rate? There is no shortage of reasons people resort to violence.

They have a bad temper. It is their way of manipulating people. Those around them are not meeting their expectations. They're losing control. They're under stress and explode. They are unhappy with their own lives and want to make others miserable, too. They're mad at others and transfer their anger toward family members or friends.

I have been told by family counselors that up to 80% of adults who were abused as children become abusers. Perhaps this is why 25% of all women have been victims of abuse, and over 4,000 women, children and even some men were housed in domestic abuse shelters last year in Kentucky.

How do you think Jesus feels about anyone who hurts others? How did he respond to Peter's violent behavior that night? He swiftly rebuked it and reversed the damage Peter had done, which tells me two things.

Jesus can heal the wounds of those who have been hurt by others. Perhaps this is the message you need to hear today if you are a victim of verbal or physical abuse.

Even though your pain is deep, chronic and severe, there is hope. Jesus understands and can help you heal and move forward. He can also lead you to others who will help you on this journey toward hope and healing. I encourage you to let them into your life to begin this process.

On the other hand, if you have a habit of hurting others, he can help you change. He can heal the pain inside you which causes you to hurt others. He will guide you as you own up to your mistakes and seek help to change your hurtful ways. Jesus cares as much for you as he does your innocent victims.

In a comic strip by Liz Johnston titled, "For Better or For Worse," Michael pushes his little sister, Lizzie, out of his bedroom and slams the door on her finger. The entire family goes to the emergency room where Lizzie gets her broken finger bandaged.

Walking out of the hospital, Michael tells Lizzie he is sorry. "It's ok, Michael, my finger won't hurt forever," Lizzie responds. "I know," Michael says, "but my memory will."

Jesus can heal bad memories and help you change the behavior which causes them if you will let him. He will lead you to people who understand and can help you, too. I hope you will let them, and I imagine I am not alone.

"The last miracle Jesus performed healed a wound caused by one of his own disciples." Don't let Jesus' next healing miracle be necessary because of something you do this week.