

**ORDINARY PEOPLE:  
THE CENTURION AT THE CROSS**

Mark 15:33-39

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, July 15, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a summer sermon series entitled “Ordinary People.”*

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*When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, ‘Listen, he is calling for Elijah.’ And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, ‘Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.’*

*Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, ‘Truly this man was God’s Son!’*

*Prayer: Lord, send your Spirit that we may experience through this sermon “the embedding of the events of salvation” in the “contemporary daily lives” we lead, that we may respond with gratitude, wisdom, and service. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.*

I.

As part of this year’s summer sermon series on ordinary but obscure people in the Bible, I am preaching today on the first character we have in the series from the New Testament. He is the centurion in Mark’s Gospel, the Roman soldier in charge of the crucifixion of Christ,<sup>1</sup> who stands near the cross facing Jesus, and who, upon Jesus’ death, exclaims: “Truly this man was the Son of God!” The centurion is probably one of the two or three better known characters among the eight we are covering this summer.

Even since I scheduled myself to preach on this centurion, I have been thinking about a short story I read in college, by Ernest Hemingway, called “Today is Friday.”<sup>2</sup>

The story is set in a drinking establishment at 11:00 p.m.

Three men enter and immediately their discussion focuses on liquor.

“You tried the red?” the first man asks.

“No, I ain’t tried it,” the second answers.

Soon their conversation turns to the day’s events.

“He was pretty good in there today,” the first man comments.

The man could be describing a bullfighter or boxer in the ring, two of Hemingway’s favorite characters, but it turns out he is describing neither. As we read further, we realize the three men are Roman soldiers, who have

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<sup>1</sup> This is indicated by Mark 15:44.

<sup>2</sup> *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway: The Finca Vigia Edition* (New York: Scribner, 1987, 271-274).

finished their day's work overseeing the crucifixion of Christ and have retired to their favorite local tavern late at night.

"Why didn't he come down off the cross?" the second soldier asks, with a hint of irritation toward the now deceased victim.

"That's not his play," the first one says.

"Show me a guy that doesn't want to come down off the cross," the second one responds, holding his ground.

The third soldier is quiet throughout. He leans on a barrel. He only speaks to turn down an offer of liquor, saying that he has a "gut-ache."

But then he speaks quietly and says that he doesn't like "nailing them on," how the whole thing of crucifixion "must take some of the men pretty bad."

"I couldn't feel any worse," he says.

Meanwhile, the bartender, who is Jewish, keeps his head down, proclaims disinterest, does his job, pours the drinks, tries to get the men to pay something on their tab, and just lays low in a town where Jews are subject to Roman domination. "I'll tell you, gentlemen. I wasn't out there. It's a thing I haven't taken any interest in."

Joshua Hren, an English professor who has written on this story, thinks that as readers we might be initially inclined to identify with the first soldier, who keeps saying "He was pretty good in there today." This soldier seems to admire the way the condemned Jesus faced his fate, with courage, dignity, calm, the "grace under pressure" for which Hemingway extolled many of his favorite characters.

But Hren thinks that, on the contrary, the soldier Hemingway is holding up for us to ponder is

- Not the first soldier who views Christ as the suffering hero
- Not the cynical second soldier – "Show me a guy who doesn't want to come down off the cross..."
- And not the bartender who tries to keep his head down and tavern afloat amid the chaos around him.

Rather, Hren thinks that the character to which Hemingway is pointing as a model is the *soldier* who is reduced to *sickness* and *silence* as he recalls the events of the day. Hemingway implies that this is the soldier who most likely was moved to say at the cross: "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

## II.

In thinking about the centurion and re-reading the Hemingway story, I was also driven back to a book I read in seminary and have kept on my shelf ever since. It was written in 1975 by a then-young scholar named Frances M. Young. It is entitled *Sacrifice and the Death of Christ*. I Googled the author and found that she is now, at age 79, still writing on the crucifixion, still lecturing on its mystery, still trying to understand and explain its meaning. I found she has recently published a book on the same topic, and that discovery led me to order it as part of my upcoming vacation reading.

In 1975, Young wrote:

Perhaps the nearest we can get to [understanding the crucifixion] is to say that on the cross,

God in Christ entered into the suffering, the evil, and the sin of his world;

He entered the darkness and transformed it into light, into blazing glory.

He took responsibility for the existence of evil in his creation;

He bore the pain of it and the guilt of it;

He accepted its consequences into himself,

And in his love  
Reconciled his holiness  
To a sinful and corrupt humanity,  
Justifying the ungodly,  
Accepting [humanity] just as [we are].

She then quotes an early church theologian, who writes of the cross of Christ:

Here was  
No overlooking of guilt  
Or trifling with forgiveness;  
No external treatment of sin,  
But a radical, a drastic,  
A passionate and absolutely final acceptance  
Of the terrible situation –  
*And an absorption*  
By the very God himself  
Of the fatal disease  
so as to neutralize it effectively.<sup>3</sup>

This emphasis on weakness, suffering, absorption, made me confess that had I been the centurion at the cross or written a story on the same subject, like the first soldier, I probably would have been inclined to identify with the heroic character of Christ, and say, as of a boxer or bullfighter, “He was pretty good in there today.”

But I think the soldier who returns to the barracks ill over the whole affair is perhaps closer to the truth both Frances Young and Hemingway want us to ponder: namely, the death in which the soldier had participated that day might actually be “an absorption by the very God himself” – the God who gave us life on the cross – “of *all* that infects humanity” – “all, everything.” *This soldier* is the preferred centurion in the story, because he senses that the meaning of the cross involves something even deeper and more mysterious than the “grace under pressure” the first soldier sees and applauds in Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> Frances M. Young, *Sacrifice and the Death of Christ* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 94. The indented quote is from *Homilies on Hebrews*, xvi and xxix., but the writer is unspecified.

### III.

The same week in which I have been pondering the centurion and Hemingway's story, I happened to spend Thursday afternoon and evening at a planning retreat for the board of the Faith and Politics Institute on which I serve.

I have served on this board for more than a decade, and we have had our ups and downs as an organization, but right now we are at a good spot, with new board members, new energy and enthusiasm, greater fundraising, more events. Our meeting was held at the African American Museum. We had a productive four-hour planning session. We got a tour of the museum afterward, and then about fifteen of us walked over the one of the restaurants in the Willard Hotel for pre-arranged dinner.

We arrived about 6:00 p.m. It was a beautiful night. The restaurant was not yet crowded, and we were seated at one long table up against a wall on the main floor, with half of us having our backs to the wall.

As you can imagine, as drinks and hors de oeuvres were served, people were talking about all manner of things: politics, sports, the World Cup, summer travel plans, personal and family matters. To my right were a group of guys, younger than me, who started laughing and carrying on. I noticed one of them was holding up his thumb, and others were taking turns bending it down and forward. I tuned into the conversation. It turns out that he was explaining that when he worked at Subway in high school, he had actually severed his thumb while slicing meat. It had been surgically re-attached within a few hours; and he was showing others that while they could cause his thumb to move, but that he no longer had that ability.

Then through the mysterious but in this case logical operation of the human mind, he looked down the table at a person to my left who was not involved in the conversation.

He called out, somewhat quietly: "Joyce, do you remember when we took that trip to Sierra Leone in 1996?"

She looked up and said, seriously: "How could I forget?"

It seems both of them had been part of a delegation to monitor elections in that war torn country. They began to recount the ride in the open helicopter, the accommodations at the nicest hotel in the country, the time spent watching people stand in line for hours to vote against all odds and against all personal security. They the man recounted watching from the hotel balcony as gang pulled a young man out of a voting line, killed him with machetes in front of the other voters, and dismembered his body. A few people, he said, fled the voting line, but most remained to vote. To vote. To vote.

About the time he finished the story, waiters brought the main course, and normally gregarious who had been listening crossed himself, bowed his head, kept it bowed for what must have been forty seconds, crossed himself again, opened his eyes. I assume he was giving thanks for the food, but that may not have been all about which he was praying.

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We cannot explain the crucifixion to our fullest satisfaction. We can only cross ourselves, bow our heads in silence before it. We can only trust that through the death it brought to the Christ who faced it heroically, God has in fact been "*absorbing*" into his very heart and mind and soul, all the suffering and sin we know. Christ on the cross "*absorbing*" into God's being the sadness and gone-wrongness of our world, the sadness and gone wrongness of our lives, of my life. An injury in high school. The execution of a citizen trying to vote. Our own personal sins and failings. All absorbed by God on the cross.

Perhaps this is what led the centurion in Mark to say “Truly this man was God’s Son!” Perhaps this is what the centurion in Hemingway’s story took with him when he trudges back to the barracks alone, leaving his fellow soldiers at the bar to close the place down and pay at least some of the bill.

#### IV.

In the past few months I have had an email correspondence with someone facing what appears to be a return of – or another episode with – cancer.

I had written the person saying:

I have you in my prayers. You seem wise, thoughtful, open and have an attitude of “meeting it head on.” All of those will stand you in good stead.

The person wrote back:

One thing I learned last time around from Christ is in our *weakness* our Lord is near and provides sufficient strength. This truth frees us – me – from the stress of having to be some sort of hero just for living. In this light the fighting, battling metaphors of dealing with cancer are unhelpful.

With the centurion on my mind, I thought of this email:

The first soldier in Hemingway’s story would fight cancer like a boxer or bullfighter. But the soldier who quietly returns to the barracks is perhaps closer to knowing what the person wrote me in the email:

In our weakness,  
In Christ’s weakness,  
In Christ’s crucifixion,  
Our Lord is near,  
And provides sufficient strength.

“Truly this man is the Son of God!”

Amen.