

**“The Shame of the Cross” based on Matthew 21:1-11 and Matthew 27:11-54**  
**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on April 2, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

*“I believe in the kingdom come, then all the colors will bleed into one, bleed into one, but yes, I'm still running. You broke the bonds, and you loosed the chains, carried the cross of my shame – O my shame. You know I believe it.”*

This song topped the charts in 1987, and our kids know it now from the movie, “Sing 2.” It’s by the Irish rock band U2, with lyrics written by lead singer Bono, who is open about his faith, and in these words, he captures a vein of the gospel and biblical story that is often missed in Christian hymnals and Christian pop music. He proclaims first the message of unity that is contained in the good news: That all people have access to the Kingdom of God, and he says he’s still running. Now it could be he is running from it, or running in search of it, or as I think, running the race of Christian life.

In fact, in the first and final verses, the ones sung in Sing 2, it feels like Bono is merging himself into the Apostle Paul’s story, by speaking to Jesus about loosening the chains of not only sin, but an often-overlooked concept in the crucifixion: shame. He says Jesus carried the “cross of his shame,” oh, his shame, and he believes. This is key. We live in a Christianized world with crosses worn as jewelry. There’s nothing wrong with that, but the shame of the cross in its historical context is often lost. Its brutality and its purpose are often overlooked.

In the lead up to our celebration of the resurrection, next Sunday for Easter, it is important to remember that in the ancient world, there were plenty of people who claimed to be divine including Emperor Augustus, the adopted son of Julius Caesar. He and his father were both called gods and each of them, it was claimed, were raised up to heaven after their death. Augustus even called himself the Son of a God. The hero Hercules was killed in a funeral pyre, and it was believed he was raised to the heavens as well. In Egypt, Osiris and other gods were even said to have died and risen. They were all said to have died and come back to life.

So, the resurrection alone is not what makes the story of Jesus unique. It’s not what makes this something to believe in rather than just a story to tell. No, what made Jesus unique for the early Christians, was the shame of the cross. So many called him their anointed king, or Messiah or Christ, and yet, he was crucified. He died the death of one who was enslaved. He died a death intended to shame its victim and end his movement. Yet his powerless followers, who had nothing among them believed he rose again in his own restored body. They became martyrs of this humble King who was crucified.

Remember that when Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem, he entered like a king. “Hosanna,” the people cried, which in Hebrew means “save us” or “help us.” He did not ride in on a horse – the symbol of a conqueror – nor even a mule, as Solomon rode into the city to claim his crown. Instead, Jesus fulfills Zechariah’s prophecy by riding a donkey and a colt. He enters as the Messiah on a symbol of peace and humility. Make no mistake, Jesus is very intentional about this and the people are confused by this image. They recognize that this prophet of Nazareth, and they recognize that he has entered the city portraying himself as the Messiah.

In ancient Rome, the peace was kept by dealing swiftly and violently with rebellion. Freedom of speech, as we know it was not even in the imagination of the people yet. What's more, Roman citizens had different rights and punishments than the rest of the rabble. A citizen, even one convicted of rebellion, might be beheaded like Paul was, or allowed to end their own life like the Roman Senator Seneca. But for the commoners and enslaved people of the empire, a Roman governor could have the person burned, or make them fight a wild beast in the arena, or they could be crucified, hanged on a cross.

Since most of those crucified were likely taken to a common grave, a field for vultures, only a few skeletal remains have been found, but the practice is well attested in history. It is called the most humiliating and brutal form of death imaginable. It was a tool the Romans used to strike fear in the people they ruled. Crucifixion was slow and the victims became a public spectacle, not for a moment, like in a fire, or in a battle with a beast, but naked for hours, exposed to birds to peck out your eyes, pick your open wounds, or anything exposed. This was all while you suffocated, unable to move, and abandoned to die.

For the Romans, shame was ultimately what was feared most, honor what was most sought. And so, the rebel who was perceived as seeking honor by overthrowing Roman rule, or an enslaved person who upset the order within Roman hierarchy, could be subject to the most intense form of shame imaginable – the cross. For the Jews, remember that Deuteronomy says clearly, that cursed is anyone who is hanged on a tree. And so, as intentional as Jesus was entering Jerusalem, so too, his opponents seem to be intentional here, ensuring his death is condemned, not just by them, but by God's word.

In Jerusalem, Jesus was brought before Pilate because Judea at that time was ruled directly by Rome. In Matthew's gospel, we get a couple of unique details about this interaction. The first is Pilate washing his hands, and the second is the people's response. Some have argued that given the gospels being written 30 years later, in the time leading up to, during, or after the great Jewish Revolt. They say this detail was added to keep Christians away from that fight. Perhaps these critics are right, I can't say for sure. Pilate goes back and forth in each gospel, and every time, ultimately, he gives in to the demands.

In each one, this exchange differs in inconsequential ways, so as a history, this gives credibility, since it is clear the sources are not just copying each other, but bear different accounts. But as a theological document, we are then left to wonder what it means for us, when we read Matthew's account of Pilate's theatrical gesture and the words of the people, "His blood is on us and our children."

If you read the whole of Matthew, you will see this handwashing thing earlier on. The Pharisees criticize Jesus for not ritually washing his hands before a meal, and Jesus says they are hypocrites, 'actors.' Meanwhile later in the Lord's Supper, in each of the synoptic gospels, Jesus says the cup is his blood is poured out. In Mark, Jesus says it is "for many," and in Luke, Jesus says, "for you." In Matthew, he says, "for many, for the forgiveness of sins."

While this interchange has been wrongly used to vindicate Romans and condemn Jewish people with antisemitism. In reality, I believe Matthew here is recognizing Pilate's actions as

empty acts. This is because if he really believed Jesus was innocent, or cared about his wife's dream, then why would he have sent Jesus to the worst punishment available? He could have had him burned or put in the arena to be eaten by a lion, or decapitated. Instead, he still condemns him to the most shameful death. Pilate's handwashing is an empty gesture. It's just an act. As Paul makes very clear, Jesus is condemned by Rome.

As for the words of the people, just as in John's gospel Caiaphas speaks prophecy unknowingly, so too, here the people prophecy one of the staple images of Christian theology, namely that the sinful are washed in the blood of the lamb for forgiveness. Indeed, the cup of the covenant is poured out for many for forgiveness. In the same way, Matthew's treatment of Judas is comparably sympathetic, for Judas confesses, admits his sin, and gives back the silver. It is in his shame though, when forgiveness is not offered, he goes out from the Temple and hangs himself.

After Pilate condemns Jesus, we see two hallmarks of crucifixion methods found in other sources. The first is the scourging, the mocking, and the beating of Jesus beforehand. Ancient writers do not indicate there is a set practice to how people are crucified, but Seneca wrote that executioners were encouraged to be creative. They were given the right to entertain themselves in making it the most humiliating it can be. And so, another key aspect was the wearing of the titular, a plaque describing your crime or charge against you. For Jesus it is written that he claims to be the "King of the Jews."

Yet, Jesus has been crucified as someone who is no more than a slave, humiliated. And so, the writing of "King of the Jews" is intended to be ironic, to show what happens to pretenders to any throne in the empire. Jesus is hanged as a billboard for all to see, making clear that Rome is in charge of Judea.

In English, we have one word for shame, and its root is a German word, meaning, "to cover" or "to hide." In Hebrew and Greek, there are multiple words for each in different degrees, that we translate as shame, but not all are as severe as what I'm talking about in regard to the cross. Those terms are more related to a feeling of internal conviction, which then leads a person to recognize guilt and repent. But the shame of the cross and the shame which is most damaging then and now.

It is the kind of shame that leads a person to feel they need to hide, to be covered, or even to die, because they believe there is no recovering from the permanent stigma placed on them. The point of the cross was to shame Jesus so much, that anyone who followed this "king" would hide, give up, disappear. Indeed, anyone who thinks cancel culture is something new, misses the fact shame has always been used to cancel. It is the power by which people are eliminated, discredited, and laid to rest. Cancel culture is nothing new, except that now anyone can do the canceling. As we spoke before about judgement and discernment, there is a difference between discerning and stating that someone had done something wrong, verses defining a person by what they have done, which is judgement.

Yet, they tried to judge Jesus, but death could not hold Jesus in the grave. Sin was overcome by the grace of Christ. And indeed, even the shame of his death could not cancel the foundation of

his church. We preach Christ crucified, as Paul said, because this shows us who God is. The love of God is so great, that the Son shared in our humanity, fully one with God, yet he did not exploit equality with God. He came to us to be obedient not only to the divine plan, but also obedient to what it is to be human, within our limits, subject to sin and death. He came to be subject even to the shame of the cross. So, he was lifted up, resurrected, sharing in the name of God, to the glory of the Father.

My sisters and brothers, let us remember this Lent, as we ponder the cross and God's love. We do this so that like Bono's lyrics in the U2 song, we can say, "I believe in the kingdom come." We learned in the story of Nicodemus, that this kingdom is for all, with all colors, all of us in our differences, being pursued by living water, to have our eyes opened to our blind spots, even if we have cause to lament, even if we feel we still haven't found what we're looking for. This is because the truth of God's word is greater than all. Our enemy is not our neighbor. Our enemy is not flesh and blood. No, we stand in Christ, who defeated sin, and battles the spiritual forces for us, as he overcame Satan in the desert.

We serve him here right now, in the ministry of reconciliation. You see, this is so, because we are still running the race of what it is to have faith, to believe, and Jesus has broken the bonds of sin and death, loosened the chains for us. That cross of shame which he carried, bears our shame on it as well and defeats it also. We are not defined by what we have done in the past. We are not defined by the judgements of this world. In Christ, we know that we can bring our sin into the light, without fear of judgement because God loves us.

We respond to God's love for us by first receiving it, then sharing that love with one another and the world. We learn by this that we cannot force others in this world to change, but we can control how we respond to sin. We control how we respond to pain, suffering and disorder, in our lives and all around us. To change the world in Christ is to reject the tools of shame, sin, and death, and engage this world with humility, patience, and God's great gift of love, which we see through grace of our Lord Jesus, who carried that cross for us all, defeating shame, in and death on it. Amen.