

“The Accidental Truth”

March 12, 2023

Mark 15:6-15

Kristin and I had occasion this past fall to attend a funeral down in Richmond, Virginia. Held at a large Episcopal church for a man who died young and unexpectedly, the sanctuary of the church was significantly bigger than our Wapping church sanctuary. And it was full of people that rainy morning...close to standing room only, in fact. I didn't count, but I'm guessing there were upwards of six hundred people in attendance.

Many of the people who came to the funeral were members of the church where the man who died had served faithfully in a number of different capacities over the years. And a significant number of people from the wider Richmond community were also among those who gathered to honor the man's life and mourn his death.

Having never been to this church in Richmond before, Kristin and I arrived early and staked out our seats in a pew, about halfway back in the sanctuary. Eventually, as the start of the service neared people sat on either side of us.

I don't spend a lot of time in my life in Episcopal churches. If I've ever been to a funeral in an Episcopal church, I don't remember it. But given my professional curiosity, I make a habit of picking up written information about a church when I walk through the doors, regardless of what kind of church it might be.

In the case of this funeral, the bulletin provided as much information as I needed. About eight pages long, it had been copied on impeccably white, high-quality paper. The font was crisp and regal. All the wording and the names and the service details were spaced appropriately and edited precisely. That church either has someone on staff who does publications. Or they farmed the bulletin out to a professional. Either way, it was one of the most impressive bulletins I've ever seen.

At one point, I was looking down and perusing the bulletin, making note of the differences between the liturgy at an Episcopal funeral and the liturgy I might use for a funeral here at Wapping Community Church. When I looked up, I saw the family of the man who died being seated in the front pew. I watched the clergy take their seats on either side of the chancel.

And standing on the floor in the front of the sanctuary, I noticed a man wearing a robe and white gloves, holding a long wooden pole in his hands. Attached to the top of that wooden pole was a cross, perhaps made out of bronze, that gleamed as though it had been recently polished. As the man held the pole and the cross above his head, he stood still and upright as if he was at attention.

I trust there are a few of you in this congregation who have spent enough time in Episcopal churches to know exactly who that person is. You may not know them by their

personal name, but you probably know the name of the role such a person plays in an Episcopal worship service. As I looked at the man holding the cross, I had a fairly good idea myself. And I confirmed my suspicion by referencing the bulletin, even though most United Church of Christ churches don't usually have someone in a similar role in our worship services.

Just then, as I'm looking up towards the front of the sanctuary, the woman to my left leaned over to me and asked me a question in a quiet voice. She subtly pointed in the direction of the man whom I just described so that we were both looking at him together. And then she turned to me and inquired, "is that the crucifier?"

I almost laughed out loud. But I sat there for a couple of seconds resisting the urge. Trying to convince myself that the woman had simply misspoken. "I'm pretty sure that's the 'crucifer'" I responded, drawing her attention to the man's name and title in the bulletin.

She gazed up at the front of the sanctuary a few moments longer. And then she nodded her head in agreement. "Yeah, he looks like the crucifier." So much for misspeaking.

It was neither the time nor the place to explain to the woman the difference between a "crucifer" who carries the long wooden pole with a cross on top in a formal processional during a worship service. And a "crucifier", as in one who actively crucifies others. Besides, it was more delicious to chuckle to myself and simply let it slide. She will never know she was sitting next to a clergy person that day...

Yeah, he looks like the crucifier. It's ironic, isn't it, the way things we find humorous in the world are often rooted in painful truth...?

Way back when, Jesus Christ was betrayed by one of his own disciples, who revealed his whereabouts in the Garden of Gethsemane. A group of Roman soldiers arrested Jesus and brought him to face Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of the province of Judaea. Pilate could hardly be bothered, but he briefly interrogated Jesus as he was required.

When Jesus refused to give Pilate the answers he was searching for, Pilate wanted nothing more than to walk away and get on to things in his day he deemed more important. But Pilate also knew, as did an entire crowd gathered in the courtyard below Pilate's palatial residence, that during the festival of the Passover it was customary for the Roman authorities to release one prisoner according to the collective will and pleasure of the crowd.

The crowd had two choices presented to them in that moment. Release Barabbas, a known and violent insurrectionist. Or release Jesus, the one known by many as "the King of the Jews." And for the crowd, the choice was crystal clear. "Release Barabbas!" While they simultaneously chanted in loud rhythmic, unison. "Crucify Jesus!"

A short time later Jesus cried out as he hung on the cross, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do”, bearing witness to the fact that the crowd in the courtyard did not have a full picture of who they were condemning...or why. But were there an objective observer in the courtyard the day Jesus was publicly sentenced, they could easily have reached one conclusion.

“Yeah, he looks like the crucifier. And she looks like the crucifier. And that group over there. They sound like crucifiers. I’m pretty sure all these people in the courtyard yelling about Jesus are crucifiers...”

One of the hardest things for you and for me to come to terms with during the season of Lent is how little has changed over the course of the last two thousand years. No, we weren’t standing in Pilate’s courtyard long ago. But that doesn’t mean you and I aren’t every bit as guilty as the ones who condemned Jesus long ago.

How many times in our lives do we judge people without really knowing who they are or what they might be going through? How often do we condemn people for their political views without ever taking the time to engage in meaningful dialogue with them? How is it that we choose violence over peace time after time?

You and I...we get caught up in the moment. We try to fit in and go along with what the crowd is saying even when we know it’s not right. We open our mouths wide and chant and shout despite the fact that we don’t really understand the consequences of our words or our actions.

And look around the world where we live. Human beings are still busy crucifying one another. In places like Ukraine. In refugee camps where refugees don’t have access to food or health care or adequate shelter. In schools and churches and workplaces where people are gunned down for no reason at all. Behind closed doors where women are violated by their significant others. On streets and roads across this nation where a human life is somehow valued less than the next drug fix.

You and I might not want to admit it. In truth, we hate to admit it. But yeah, you and I are the crucifier...

One of the main reasons why Jesus died on the cross was so that we could learn how to better love one another. Instead of judging and condemning and crucifying one another, can we commit to treating each other with dignity and respect? And even though Jesus offers us forgiveness for falling short and not always knowing what we’re doing, can you and I remember every person is wonderfully made in the image of God who created us?

Yeah, we do look an awful lot like crucifiers. Still, God’s deepest hope for us is that we realize it, confess it, and vow to live differently...in the name and in memory of Jesus Christ. Amen.



