

The Power of the Servant
Luke 23:32-34. 39-43, 47
March 28, 2021 (Palm/Passion Sunday)
Pastor Steve Richards

Nearly 50 years ago, Dr. Karl Menninger wrote the book, *Whatever Became of Sin*. I was reading through the book again last week – not that I have any doubt that sin has somehow gotten lost in my life or anyone else's. But we would like to think it has! Menninger begins his book with the story of a well-dressed man standing on a busy street corner in downtown Chicago. As pedestrians hurried by on their way to lunch or business, he would solemnly lift his right arm, point to the person nearest him, and shout "Guilty!" Then without changing expression, he would resume his stiff stance for a few moments before raising his arm, pointing to another pedestrian, and shouting again, "Guilty!" Menninger writes that the effect of this strange pantomime on passersby was almost eerie. They would stare at him, hesitate, look away, look at each other, and then at him again before hurriedly continuing on their way. One man who had been the object of the man's strange verdict turned to another and said, "But how did he know?"

Because we all know, don't we? It is possible to do something so wrong that it invades your life and stays with you, lives with you, and you can't eat enough. Sleep enough, work enough, lie enough to get rid of it. There's no amount of money that can make it go away. Somehow saying "I'm sorry" doesn't make it right. Try as you might, you can't fix it. Many years ago, I greeted a young woman here at church. She was expecting a child – or so I thought. And when I greeted her, I said, "It looks like your due date will be here soon." And she gave me the strangest look and replied, "What do you mean?" And suddenly I realized she was not the person I thought she was. "I'm sorry," I said. "I was thinking of someone else." And really, I was, but the damage had been done. Guilty! I've learned it is best not to comment on anyone's appearance. I felt ashamed – and just recalling that moment, I feel the shame all over again. So, what do you do?

The answer is found in the cross – or more specifically in the One who hangs on the cross. The word, cross, is at the root of the word excruciating – and that's what it was. Rome had perfected the cross as an instrument of torture. The goal was maximum pain for as long as possible, and some who were crucified could be kept alive for as long as three days. For Jesus, it was six hours of agony. The spikes were driven through his wrists, a spike through each ankle on either side of the cross. The ledge that we often see in paintings was actually a seat that was meant to tempt the victim into even greater pain. He could rest on the seat if he lowered himself and stretched his arms but that would place even more stress on the nerve in the wrists and once on the seat, he could not breathe. So, to breathe, he would have to pull himself up which would only make the pain excruciating. He was also crucified naked – the ultimate humiliation. He was not more than 3 feet off the ground, so that if Mary was standing nearby as John's Gospel describes she could almost reach her son's face. Crucifixions took place outside the main entrance to the city so that everyone who entered the city would pass and be reminded that this is what happens to you if you defy Rome's authority.

As he hung on the cross, Jesus prayed, **Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing.** Jesus is being tortured to death and he prays for people and their forgiveness. Forgiving the sins of others is what got him on the cross in the first place. It was one of the charges – blasphemy – only God can forgive sins! But now from the cross, he is the servant – the suffering servant who comes before God, pleading on behalf of humanity for mercy and a new beginning. And at the same time, he is the sacrifice being made. He offers himself, totally surrendered: "All I have I give to you, O God. Please forgive them." Who is the "them?" The

Romans who nailed him to the cross, or the Jewish leaders who conspired to put him there, or the crowd watching as he suffers and dies, or the criminals on either side, or could it be us all these years later? It's as if Jesus look down from the cross though time to you and me. He's praying for us all, "Father, forgive them." And we need this, don't we?

A few nights ago, I was having a hard time sleeping so I got up, went downstairs, and turned on the television. What I saw was a rebroadcast of the Dr. Oz Show. I had never seen this show. Maybe you have. Dr. Oz came to fame as a doctor who often appeared on the Oprah Show. He is a heart surgeon, and he has this daily talk show. In this particular episode, Dr. Oz described how a few weeks ago, he was in the Newark, NJ airport when a man at the baggage claim collapsed. The man's heart stopped. Dr. Oz just happened to be at the same baggage claim and immediately began CPR until an airport officer arrived with defibrillator which restored the man's heartbeat. The man's name was Joe, and on the show, we learned was that this was not Joe's first brush with death. 16 years ago, he had triple bypass surgery. Did he change his lifestyle? Not really. He continued to eat and drink what he knew was not healthy. He knew there was a better way, but he didn't take it. He got a second chance. He knew he should have changed his ways, but he didn't do it. And whether it's food or drink or the way we treat others or ourselves. The Bible says this is how we are. We don't do what we should do, and we do what we should not do. Here's what Joe said: [video] Somehow, I think that's what Jesus was says to the criminals who were dying with him. You will write your future history today. Today, you will be with me in paradise. Because I am doing something for you that you cannot do for yourself.

The Gospel tell us we need a Savior – one who can forgive you, who can atone for your sins and give you a fresh start. When a police officer pulls you over for speeding, you roll down you window and beg for mercy. You're embarrassed and sorry. And the officer says, "I'm going to give you a way to atone for your sin." And he gives me a little piece of paper and there's was a dollar sign with a number, and tan address where I could mail my atonement to pay for my sin. And I sent it in, knowing I did my part (at least until the insurance company found out about it). But sometimes we cannot fully atone for what we've done. Remember the story of Bernie Madoff – taking billions of dollars from unsuspecting people. He was arrested, tried, sent to prison for the rest of his life. But does that really atone for what he's done? Does that make it up to all who lost their hopes and dreams? There are things we do that we cannot fully atone.

In the Old Testament, 613 laws were given to the Jews. All of the laws were meant to be kept but God knew the people would have a hard time keeping the laws, so God provided a way in which people could atone for their sins. Sometimes we sin accidentally and sometimes we sin on purpose. Sometimes we sin by what we do and sometimes we sin by what we don't do. The Old testament said if you put out one person's eye, they your eye was put out. If you knocked out someone's teeth, then your teeth were knocked out. Any eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. And in doing so you would say I'm sorry and I will live with what you must live with. But whenever you sin against another, you also sin against God – so atonement was also necessary with God. The people would bring a lamb to the temple to make an offering for the sins that were committed. The people were saying, "I'm sorry, Lord, for what I've done. Forgive me and set me free." Then they would watch as the priest slit the throat of that lamb, knowing their sin came with a price – the life of a lamb.

We know from human experience that to forgive costs us something. If someone's error costs you \$2000, you can forgive that error, but you are still left with \$2000 less in your bank account.

The prophet Isaiah said the day would come when God would take the Suffering Servant as payment, as the price for the sins of the people. One sacrifice for all time. **He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities.** (Isaiah 53:5) John the Baptist would say at the moment of Jesus' baptism: **Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.** And at the Last Supper, Jesus would lift the cup and say: **This is my blood poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of your sins.** Jesus was doing what only God's Son could do – to be our offering of atonement, to make right what we can never make right. There on the cross, Jesus stretched out his arms as if he were saying to us all – I do this for you. I also do this for God. To pull us back in right relationship. Here's what Paul says in Romans 5: **While we were still weak, at the right moment, Christ died for ungodly people. It isn't often that someone will die for a righteous person, though maybe someone might dare to die for a good person. But God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us.**

I have to admit there are times when I don't fully understand how this works, but then I've sat with people and heard the pain of their story, doing what they knew they should not have done and living with that pain, the pain and guilt eating away at them. Pastor, what should I do? I can't keep living this way. How can I ever be new? The answer is in the cross. Jesus paid the price for what you cannot do for yourself. The cross is for you and me. God is saying – you are in need of saving. I will forgive you and set you free.

[cross is carried into the sanctuary]

Seeing the price that was paid for my forgiveness, I want to change. I want to live a different way. All you need is to say, Yes to what God would do for you.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of March 28, 2021

Weekly Prayer: Lord Jesus, you willingly offered yourself to ridicule, torture, and death for our sake and even for those who did these things to you. You knew your purpose and calmly walked the path of righteousness for our sake. Thank you for bringing salvation and light into the darkness of our lives. Thank you for being our blessed Savior. Amen.

Monday, March 29

Scripture: Luke 21:5-6, 28-38

Some people were talking about the temple, how it was decorated with beautiful stones and ornaments dedicated to God. Jesus said, "As for the things you are admiring, the time is coming when not even one stone will be left upon another. All will be demolished."

Now when these things begin to happen, stand up straight and raise your heads, because your redemption is near." Jesus told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, you know that God's kingdom is near. I assure you that this generation won't pass away until everything has happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will certainly not pass away. "Take care that your hearts aren't dulled by drinking parties, drunkenness, and the anxieties of day-to-day life. Don't let that day fall upon you unexpectedly, like a trap. It will come upon everyone who lives on the face of the whole earth. Stay alert at all times, praying that you are strong enough to escape everything that is about to happen and to stand before the Human One." Every day Jesus was teaching in the temple, but he spent each night on the Mount of Olives. All the people rose early in the morning to hear him in the temple area.

Observation: Jesus had bad news—the Temple, the place where Jews met with God, would be destroyed. Still more, great hardship and persecution would follow the Temple’s destruction. Jesus’ shocking words about the Jerusalem Temple came true in 70 A.D. Despite the dire facts of this life, Jesus urged his listeners to keep faith through the hardship. His central message was, “Don’t be alarmed ... raise your heads, because your redemption is near.”

Application: Picture a worst-case scenario, the hardest tragedy you can imagine. That’s what the destruction of the Temple sounded like to first-century Jewish ears. Jesus told his hearers this unthinkable event would happen, yet he told them to keep their faith because their “redemption was near” (verse 28). Think back to a hard time you’ve faced. Did your faith help you weather the storm? What made it hard to keep your faith in the midst of the hardship? Who serves as a model for you of how to live with patient faith when life gets hard?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I trust you even when life gets difficult. Give me the strength and patience I need to deal with life’s struggles, the ones I am facing now and those that will come in the future. Amen.

Tuesday, March 30

Scripture: Luke 22:1-6, 14-23

The Festival of Unleavened Bread, which is called Passover, was approaching. The chief priests and the legal experts were looking for a way to kill Jesus, because they were afraid of the people. Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, who was one of the Twelve. He went out and discussed with the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard how he could hand Jesus over to them. They were delighted and arranged payment for him. He agreed and began looking for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them—a time when the crowds would be absent.

When the time came, Jesus took his place at the table, and the apostles joined him. He said to them, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. I tell you, I won’t eat it until it is fulfilled in God’s kingdom.” After taking a cup and giving thanks, he said, “Take this and share it among yourselves. I tell you that from now on I won’t drink from the fruit of the vine until God’s kingdom has come.” After taking the bread and giving thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, he took the cup after the meal and said, “This cup is the new covenant by my blood, which is poured out for you. “But look! My betrayer is with me; his hand is on this table. The Human One goes just as it has been determined. But how terrible it is for that person who betrays him.” They began to argue among themselves about which of them it could possibly be who would do this.

Observation: The annual Passover meal (part of the weeklong Festival of Unleavened Bread) reminded Jews of God’s great act rescuing them from Egypt (Exodus 12:1-18). It was their defining story. When Jesus and his disciples shared the Passover meal, with the cross just ahead, Jesus added meaning to the meal. He said that from that time on, the bread and wine would point to his even greater act of deliverance in dying and rising again.

Application: The Passover pointed to God’s great act in the past. When Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper, it didn’t just recall the cross, but also pointed forward. Jesus said, “until it is fulfilled” (verse 16). This was a promise that God’s kingdom will come. Do you trust that this

promise is not just a bunch of empty words but a future you can count on? Can you see how taking part in Communion reinforces your trust and hope?

Prayer: Living Lord, I rejoice in your saving acts in the past. But even more, I look forward with such eagerness to the day when you fully establish your kingdom. Keep me faithfully on track until that day. Amen.

Wednesday, March 31

Scripture: Luke 22:31-34, 54-62

“Simon, Simon, look! Satan has asserted the right to sift you all like wheat. However, I have prayed for you that your faith won’t fail. When you have returned, strengthen your brothers and sisters.” Peter responded, “Lord, I’m ready to go with you, both to prison and to death!” Jesus replied, “I tell you, Peter, the rooster won’t crow today before you have denied three times that you know me.”

After they arrested Jesus, they led him away and brought him to the high priest’s house. Peter followed from a distance. When they lit a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. Then a servant woman saw him sitting in the firelight. She stared at him and said, “This man was with him too.” But Peter denied it, saying, “Woman, I don’t know him!” A little while later, someone else saw him and said, “You are one of them too.” But Peter said, “Man, I’m not!” An hour or so later, someone else insisted, “This man must have been with him, because he is a Galilean too.” Peter responded, “Man, I don’t know what you are talking about!” At that very moment, while he was still speaking, a rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter, and Peter remembered the Lord’s words: “Before a rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.” And Peter went out and cried uncontrollably.

Observation: “Lord,” Peter said, “I’m ready to go with you, both to prison and to death!” Christian tradition said Peter was crucified in Rome around 64 A.D., but when he spoke these words, he wasn’t, in fact, ready for that. Jesus knew him better than he knew himself. Jesus was arrested, and when bystanders said he must have been with Jesus, Peter denied it three times. Then a rooster crowed, and Peter “went out and cried uncontrollably.”

Application: Of all the disciples, only Peter walked on water (Matthew 14:28-29). He was first to say flat out that Jesus was the Messiah (Mark 8:27-29). He was no coward – just a human being under pressure. Has pressure ever led you to be ashamed of and to hide your allegiance to Jesus? Jesus told those who arrested him, “This is your time, when darkness rules” (verse 53). Was there anything Peter might have done to keep the darkness from seeping into his soul? (In verse 46, Jesus said, “Get up and pray so that you won’t give in to temptation.”)

Prayer: Lord Jesus, like Peter, I keep learning things about myself, finding a need to grow in areas I thought I had mastered. Thank you for your ongoing grace, for nudging me to grow even when I’m comfortable. Amen.

Maundy Thursday, April 1

Scripture: Luke 22:63-23:12

The men who were holding Jesus in custody taunted him while they beat him. They blindfolded him and asked him repeatedly, “Prophecy! Who hit you?” Insulting him, they said many other horrible things against him.

As morning came, the elders of the people, both chief priests and legal experts, came together, and Jesus was brought before their council. They said, "If you are the Christ, tell us!" He answered, "If I tell you, you won't believe. And if I ask you a question, you won't answer. But from now on, *the Human One will be seated on the right side of the power of God.*" They all said, "Are you God's Son, then?" He replied, "You say that I am." Then they said, "Why do we need further

The whole assembly got up and led Jesus to Pilate and began to accuse him. They said, "We have found this man misleading our people, opposing the payment of taxes to Caesar, and claiming that he is the Christ, a king." Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus replied, "That's what you say." Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no legal basis for action against this man." But they objected strenuously, saying, "He agitates the people with his teaching throughout Judea—starting from Galilee all the way here." Hearing this, Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean. When he learned that Jesus was from Herod's district, Pilate sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time. Herod was very glad to see Jesus, for he had heard about Jesus and had wanted to see him for quite some time. He was hoping to see Jesus perform some sign. Herod questioned Jesus at length, but Jesus didn't respond to him. The chief priests and the legal experts were there, fiercely accusing Jesus. Herod and his soldiers treated Jesus with contempt. Herod mocked him by dressing Jesus in elegant clothes and sent him back to Pilate. Pilate and Herod became friends with each other that day. Before this, they had been enemies.

Observation: Throughout most of his public ministry, Jesus' enemies had watched him, claiming that he was a false teacher, perhaps even demonic (Luke 11:14-16). But when they had him in their power, the contrast was striking. Jesus remained calm and in control of himself. The leaders, who claimed great righteousness, were frenzied, unfair and cruel, showing a spirit tragically filled with hatred and evil.

Application: In verse 63, Luke said Jesus' guards taunted and beat him BEFORE the council met for the trial (Luke 22:66). This was a classic Alice in Wonderland type of trial: verdict first, evidence later. Pontius Pilate, a tough Roman career politician, saw through their charges, saying, "I find no legal basis for action against this man." Has anyone ever treated you unfairly? In what ways can you grow toward having the spirit with which Jesus endured this mockery of a trial?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I wasn't part of that awful kangaroo trial. But fear or prejudice can blind me, too. Forgive me, cleanse me, and give me a clearer vision of how my actions can heal or harm. Amen.

NOTE: I invite you to attend an in-person walk through communion at Messiah Church anytime between 4:30-6:00 pm today. We will also provide a brief online communion at 7:00 pm (www.messiahchurch.org/live)

Good Friday, April 2

Scripture: Luke 23:32-46

They also led two other criminals to be executed with Jesus. When they arrived at the place called The Skull, they crucified him, along with the criminals, one on his right and the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." They drew lots as a way of dividing up his clothing. The people were standing around watching, but the leaders sneered at him, saying, "He saved others. Let him save himself if he really is the Christ

sent from God, the chosen one.” The soldiers also mocked him. They came up to him, offering him sour wine and saying, “If you really are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” Above his head was a notice of the formal charge against him. It read “This is the king of the Jews.” One of the criminals hanging next to Jesus insulted him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” Responding, the other criminal spoke harshly to him, “Don’t you fear God, seeing that you’ve also been sentenced to die? We are rightly condemned, for we are receiving the appropriate sentence for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus replied, “I assure you that today you will be with me in paradise.”

It was now about noon, and darkness covered the whole earth until about three o’clock, while the sun stopped shining. Then the curtain in the sanctuary tore down the middle. Crying out in a loud voice, Jesus said, “Father, *into your hands I entrust my life.*” After he said this, he breathed for the last time.

Observation: Three times (verse 22) Pilate asked Jesus’ accusers why they were so insistent on his death. Pilate got no coherent answers, yet “their voices won out” (verse 23). Jesus was nailed to a cross by a public road. He asked God to forgive his executioners, promised a crucified thief eternal life, and prayed Psalm 31:5 as he died. On that bad Friday, Jesus absorbed and transformed human evil into God’s central saving act, and that turned the day into “Good Friday.”

Application: Many Jewish mothers used Psalm 31:5 (“into your hand I entrust my life”) as a children’s bedtime prayer. Jesus may well have learned the verse from his mother Mary when he was a child. That day, he repeated that prayer on the cross. Mary was there that day (Luke 23:49). Imagine what she must have felt hearing her dying son repeat the trusting words of the bedtime prayer she taught him so many years earlier. Are you able to entrust your life fully into God’s hand?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, your example of trust, at a moment of pain and death, shows me again that in your kingdom “the worst thing is never the last thing.” Into your hand I entrust my life. Amen.

NOTE: I hope you will watch a powerful presentation of the Seven Last Words of Christ – online at 7:00 pm today. (www.messiahchurch.org/live)

Saturday, April 3

Scripture: Luke 23:47-56

When the centurion saw what happened, he praised God, saying, “It’s really true: this man was righteous.” All the crowds who had come together to see this event returned to their homes beating their chests after seeing what had happened. And everyone who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance observing these things. Now there was a man named Joseph who was a member of the council. He was a good and righteous man. He hadn’t agreed with the plan and actions of the council. He was from the Jewish city of Arimathea and eagerly anticipated God’s kingdom. This man went to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body. Taking it down, he wrapped it in a linen cloth and laid it in a tomb carved out of the rock, in which no one had ever been buried. It was the Preparation Day for the Sabbath, and the Sabbath was quickly approaching. The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph. They saw the tomb and how Jesus’ body was laid in it, then they went away and prepared fragrant spices and perfumed oils. They rested on the Sabbath, in keeping with the commandment.

Observation: Luke reported two unexpected acts after Jesus died. The Roman centurion, after directing the crucifixion, “praised God, saying, ‘It’s really true: this man was righteous.’” The Romans meant crucifixion to create humiliation and fear, so they often left crucified corpses in the open. Belatedly, Joseph of Arimathea, a council member and silent dissenter at Jesus’ mock trial, went public to give the body a decent burial. No one expected the resurrection, but Joseph’s act unwittingly made Easter more powerful, because Jesus’ friends knew just where his body was.

Application: In his commentary on this scripture, N. T. Wright says: “It really happened. It wasn’t a mistake. We didn’t get it wrong. It’s true. You can rely on it. This is the main point of Luke’s account of Jesus’ death and burial. He began his book telling Theophilus he could rely on these facts, and now that the most vital one is before us, he presents his witnesses one by one. The centurion saw ... The crowds standing by saw ... Jesus’ followers, not least the women, stood at some distance, but they too saw ... Then the burial: again, the women saw what happened ... Evidence. Eyewitnesses. This is what Luke promised, and this is what he’s now giving us.” Every witness, every fact was vital. On Easter, an otherwise incredible, one-of-a-kind event was coming. Ponder how different Jesus’ impact on your life would be if the story ended here – if the last thing was the worst thing.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, you walked into the darkest prison I know: the prison of death. You went there with a purpose: to break the doors of that dark place wide open. Thank you for bringing light into darkness, life out of death. Amen.

Note: Our Kid Street Easter worship can be viewed at 9:00 am this morning at www.messiahchurch.org/live or anytime later at www.youtube.com/messiahchurchmn.