

“Grace Under Pressure”

John 18:1-11

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This morning our attention is drawn to the beginning of the end of Jesus’ life and earthly ministry. Our text sets the scene for Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion.

The focus turns from Jesus talking about his death to the event itself. The pace of the story moves quickly as the plan to discredit Jesus and crucify him unfolds.

Our text opens in the Upper Room where Jesus and the disciples have eaten the Passover meal. At the conclusion of this meal, Jesus quietly leads the disciples through the Golden Gate, across the Kidron Valley and into the Garden of Gethsemane.

Normally, this would have been a pleasant walk on a beautiful spring night. Nothing about this evening was normal, though. Danger was in the air, and everyone felt it.

Jesus and the disciples had been in Jerusalem all week, beginning with his triumphal entry on what we now refer to as Palm Sunday. Throughout the week, Jesus interacted with the religious authorities, and those encounters had not gone well.

Things quickly turned sour between Jesus and these leaders when he entered the crowded Temple during this holiest of weeks and made a scene. He went to the area where the moneychangers sat up shop, along with those in charge of selling animals for sacrifices, and ran them out of the Temple. He condemned them for exploiting the people who had come to worship God and pray, accusing them of turning this house of prayer into a den of thieves.

You can imagine the chaos this disruption created. Not only were people scrambling to retrieve the money and animals, but they were talking about this brave Galilean carpenter who resembled the prophets of old when they spoke truth to power in such visible and effective ways.

The relationship between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees did not get better as the week progressed. Jesus told parables that indicted the religious leaders for their hypocrisy and

self-indulgence. He exposed their addiction to power, prestige, attention, money and control. He accused them of robbing defenseless widows and catering to the powerful and rich.

It was evident to everyone that Jesus was not timid or shy, and he was certainly not intimidated by those he criticized. Like the prophets from the past whom the people revered, Jesus was on a mission to reveal the true nature of God and to give voice to the dreams of God for all people. He had a message to deliver, one rooted in the pursuit of justice and the establishment of peace, and nothing would deter him.

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 for blasphemy and for disturbing the peace. Today's text describes the beginning of that process.

Sometime after Jesus and the disciples entered the garden to pray, Judas arrived with a contingent of Roman soldiers and religious authorities. You recall Judas abruptly left the Passover meal to rendezvous with the scribes and Pharisees and to accept their bribe for telling them where Jesus would be later that night. Thirty pieces of silver was his bounty, which he would return before hanging himself out of guilt and remorse.

It appears between two and six hundred soldiers carrying torches, lanterns and weapons accompanied Judas to the garden. It was obvious they believed Jesus would run and hide from them, and they would have to hunt for him in places moonlight could not penetrate.

How ironic it was they went looking for the "light of the world" with their puny artificial lights. How tragic it was they believed the world needed their light more than his.

It was no coincidence Jesus was arrested at a time everyone in Jerusalem was bedded down for the night. Jesus was quite popular among the common folk, and in all likelihood, they would have offered resistance had Jesus been arrested in broad daylight. To eliminate this possibility, Jesus was arrested under the cover of darkness.

Upon arriving at the garden, the authorities were surprised and completely caught off guard when Jesus took the initiative to approach them. "Who is it you want?" he asked, reminiscent of the 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, the embodiment of God's nature and the fulfillment of God's dreams for all humans.

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

Jesus repeated the question, this time making a plea for the authorities to let his disciples go. Carefully notice, however, that Jesus did not use the word disciple when referring to them. Instead, he merely called them men in an attempt to distance himself from them.

“My prayer is not that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one,” Jesus prayed on behalf of his disciples just moments before leaving the Upper Room. (John 17:15) Jesus was now doing his part to make this happen.

At this point, Simon Peter surprised everyone when he drew a sword from his cloak and cut off the ear of the high priest’s servant. Jesus quickly responded by rebuking Peter, and according to Luke’s account of this incident, he bent down, picked up the man’s ear and reattached it.

I am confident Jesus did this out of compassion for the high priest’s servant. I also believe he did this as a way of keeping Peter from being arrested for carrying a weapon during Passover, something strictly forbidden to prevent an insurrection when so many people were in Jerusalem.

I can only imagine what a dramatic moment this must have been. Had anyone ever witnessed such grace under pressure? I doubt it.

About twenty-five years ago, Dr. Timothy George, Dean of the Beeson Divinity School at Samford, made a statement related to the final portion of our text that has had a profound impact upon me as a person and a minister. “The last miracle Jesus performed healed a wound caused by one of his own disciples,” Dr. George declared. Those words have been inscribed upon my heart for over two decades, and I find them to be as informative and powerful now as they were the first time I heard them.

Through the years, I have thought often about what Dr. George said in that Bible study. What makes this particular miracle significant is not that Jesus healed the wound of an enemy while under great stress, as difficult as this must have been. What sets this miracle apart from others is that Jesus healed a wound caused by the leader of his own disciples.

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

Peter was as close to Jesus as anyone could be. 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 transformative ethic of love and Jesus’ insistence on non-violent resistance to evil. Yet, when the authorities came for Jesus Peter pulled his sword and started swinging.

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.

Is there blood on your hands? Can you identify with Simon Peter today?

How do we as believers hurt others? There is a wide variety of ways.

Sometimes we hurt others with words. We embarrass, humiliate, insult, demean and demoralize others by saying things that are harmful or false.

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

We hurt people by manipulating or controlling them for selfish reasons.

And then, we hurt people through acts of violence as Peter did that dreadful night when he attacked Malchus, the High Priest's servant.

Sadly, the place where much of this violence occurs is in the home. This includes physical assault, battery, sexual assault and other abusive behavior.

According to the *National Coalition Against Domestic Violence*, domestic violence hotlines receive approximately 21,100 calls a day, which averages out to 15 calls per minute. I wonder how many people in this sanctuary today have made one of those calls.

Why does a person resort to violence? Several reasons have been identified.

Violence is due to the unwillingness of someone to control their temper and to deal with frustration and anger in healthy ways.

Violence is used to intimidate others and to beat them into submission.

Violence is an unhappy person's way of making others miserable.

Tragically, violence is a common behavior among adults who were abused as children.

I have been told by family counselors that up to 80% of adults abused as children become abusers. It is a self-perpetuating, vicious cycle.

Is this true of you? Are you caught up in that cycle of pain?

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.