

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, August 21, 2022
10am

Text: Luke 23:44-56 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

Last year, I preached at a memorial service unlike any other I have experienced. The service was for sixteen people, none of whom attended my church. They were our community's unclaimed dead. Some of them died from old age or illness without any family or friends to care for them. Others died unsheltered on the city's streets, victims of poverty, mental illness, and addiction. One person was found in a ditch alongside Union Avenue; the coroner concluded they had been murdered, but no one came forward seeking their whereabouts, and so their name was unknown to us.

I preached on Psalm 139, my favorite psalm. The psalmist speaks beautifully about being known and loved by God, even in death. The way we treat our dead says a lot about whether and how we value people when they are alive. This is especially true for the people society has cast off, like our unsheltered neighbors.

When a member of our church family dies, we take the time to mourn them and honor their memory. We claim them as having briefly belonged to us in life, and then we release them back to God. But these people had no one to claim them and no one to release them. So, every year, a non-profit organization named Interfaith Works held a public memorial service at a local funeral home. They called it the Day of Remembrance. Together we claimed these people as having belonged to the community. We thanked God for the gift of their lives. We asked forgiveness for the ways the community had failed them. And then we released them back to God.

The service was a beautiful and moving tribute to their lives. But it was also a quiet act of resistance against a social hierarchy that says only certain lives have value, only certain lives are beloved. That may be so in the eyes of our society, but it is not so in the eyes of God. God claims all people in compassion.

[pause]

When Joseph of Arimathea goes to the Roman governor Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus, his ask is also a quiet act of resistance. Jesus has just been executed by the Roman empire. He was executed with the consent of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious council. Joseph is a member of that council, but he did not agree with the council's decision. It is unclear whether Joseph spoke out loud against their decision or dissented only in his heart. It is also unclear why he asks for Jesus' body. Perhaps he feels a sense of responsibility for Jesus' death. Perhaps he believes giving Jesus a decent burial is a matter of moral and religious integrity. Or perhaps he saw something of the face of God in Jesus and finds himself drawn to Jesus in death as others were drawn to him in life.

In any case, Joseph goes to Pilate, and he asks for Jesus' body. It is an unusual ask. Officially, Jesus has been executed for treason – claiming he has power over Caesar. The Romans do not return the bodies of people crucified for treason. Traitors of the state are criminals, and criminals do not deserve a decent burial. Typically, the bodies are simply left to rot on their crosses as a warning to the public: *Do not do what these people did.*

But Jewish religious law teaches that the dead should always be buried. A criminal may not deserve to be buried with religious rites in a family tomb, but they still deserve the dignity of burial. The religious law also orders that the dead must be buried before the Sabbath; Jesus died on a Friday, just hours before the start of the Sabbath. As a member of the Sanhedrin, Joseph is responsible for upholding Jewish law in the community. His decision to go to Pilate and ask for the body of Jesus is its own public statement: *In the Kingdom of God, we do things differently than in the Kingdom of Men.* When God's values and the world's values conflict, our actions should always demonstrate God's values.

I do not think Joseph had to argue long with Pilate for Jesus' body. After all, Pilate was never completely convinced of Jesus' guilt. The fact that Joseph was a member of the same religious council that had just condemned Jesus was probably persuasion enough for Pilate. Joseph could have chosen to wash his hands of the whole affair. The religious council gave Jesus over to Rome, Rome crucified Jesus, and there was nothing now that could be done about the whole sorry situation.

But Joseph chooses differently. He does not use his power as a member of the Sanhedrin to further condemn Jesus and leave his body hanging on that cross. Instead, he chooses to use his power to plead for clemency for Jesus' body. He risks his standing with the Sanhedrin and his community to do the decent thing.

That one small act of mercy is remarkable, but Joseph goes a step further. He takes Jesus' body down from the cross himself. And then he wraps Jesus in fresh linen and buries him in a brand-new tomb. This tomb most likely belonged to Joseph, purchased with his money; he may even have been reserving it for his own burial or that of a family member. The people who loved Jesus felt anguish at his death and wondered where they could bury him. Perhaps Joseph saw their anguish and was moved by it and thought to himself: *I have an empty tomb.*

Joseph was not a disciple of Jesus; he did not have the same kind of intimacy with Jesus that the Twelve had, and he was not convinced that Jesus was the Son of God. Even so, he chooses to use some of his own resources to give Jesus a dignified burial. Compassion for another person should never be conditioned on whether we personally know or like that person or agree with their life choices or beliefs. Compassion looks at another person with the eyes of the heart, not the mind. Compassion says, "I see your suffering and, as a fellow human being who has also suffered, I suffer with you." That is what the word compassion means: to suffer *with*. And that is what God did for us in Jesus Christ: put on human flesh and suffer with *us*.

But God also showed us in the resurrection of Jesus that suffering never has the last word. When Joseph placed Jesus' body in the tomb, and rolled the stone shut, he had no way of knowing that God would shortly after empty that tomb and in the process permanently change the world. He had no way of knowing that that tomb would become the site of Jesus' resurrection. What miracles God can work when we offer up our lives and resources to God to be used in compassionate service to the world! Even when we have our doubts, even when we wonder if what we have to offer could really make a difference – what miracles God can work when we say, "Use me, Lord!" Sometimes it can feel like it takes superhuman strength to follow the way of God, to live out our kingdom values in a world that *devalues* what God says is good and right and just. But when we listen to the Holy Spirit, when we listen to that still, small prompting in our souls and give ourselves over to God, what miracles God can work!

Did Joseph know how God was going to use him? No. Did Joseph know his donated tomb would one day become a sign of victory for generations of Christians? No. But God equipped him to play an important role in salvation history. This brief postlude to the crucifixion has had an immense impact on the faith of millions of Christians. It has inspired hundreds of pieces of religious art, including the one displayed on our screens today. It has informed just treatment of the dead in our churches and communities through acts of charity like the Day of Remembrance. Joseph's legacy is his powerful witness to compassion and decency in a world that still does not have enough of either.

[pause]

Six months into the pandemic, an unexpected email landed in my inbox. It was from Interfaith Works, the organization that hosts the Day of Remembrance. The email was addressed to a group of clergy serving the Olympia area. In addition to memorializing the community's unclaimed dead, Interfaith Works runs a homeless shelter for disabled older adults. At the time of the email the shelter was housed in one of the downtown churches. But because of COVID and the need for physical distancing, half of the shelter guests had been moved to a run-down dental clinic uptown. The clinic was being torn down soon to break ground on a brand-new, state-of-the-art shelter – the first of its kind in the city. So, Interfaith Works came to us clergy with an ask: Is there a church that would be willing to serve as a temporary shelter until the permanent one was complete?

My church's building had been closed for six months because of the virus. We were worshiping and discipling entirely online. I read the email and immediately felt the Holy Spirit nudge my heart and whisper: *Amanda, you have an empty building.* Just that; nothing more.

The invitation was impossible to ignore. For thirteen months during the height of the pandemic our church building sheltered thirty-eight disabled older adults suffering from chronic homelessness. It was a 24/7 shelter: the guests ate at the church, slept at the church, showered at the church. The arrangement was not always comfortable; it required sacrifices on our part, especially after we resumed in-person church activities. But the thing that grieved my congregation the most – the inability to meet and worship in their beloved building – God redeemed and used to compassionately serve some vulnerable members of our community.

The shelter guests moved into their beautiful new shelter one month after I preached at the Day of Remembrance. It felt like our ministry of compassion had come full circle. In life we claimed our houseless neighbors as our own by giving them a temporary home. And in death we claimed them again by giving them a dignified burial.

God prepares and equips us to be in ministry to the world; we do not equip ourselves. Our imagination for who and what God will use for God's compassionate purposes are often terribly limited. But whether it is an empty tomb or an empty building, God can work miracles when we remain open to the Holy Spirit's promptings and leadership. Like Joseph of Arimathea, our ultimate legacy is our witness to compassion and decency, the same compassion that God first showed us.

Amen.