



From the Pulpit: March 27, 2022

Fourth Sunday in Lent—Spring Break—Communion

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Matthew 27:27–31

Lent in Plain Sight, V: Thorns

At Kenilworth Union Church we are preaching a sermon series called *Lent in Plain Sight*, devotion in ten objects. We're looking a common object such as bread, coins, shoes, and today, thorns.

One good thing about a sermon series like *Lent in Plain Sight* is that the preacher at least gets to learn a lot about things he thought he knew a lot about already.

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

For instance, the rock group Poison famously said, "Every rose has its thorn," but technically that's not true.

Roses have prickles. If you want to know the difference between a thorn and a prickle, ask the biology teacher at New Trier.

"When those Roman soldiers placed that spiky tiara on Jesus' forehead, they weren't using it as an instrument of torture so much as an instrument of humiliation."

I also learned that there is a spectacular flowering plant called Christ Plant or Christ Thorn, and an equally menacing starfish called The Crown of Thorns.

After Pontius Pilate declares Jesus innocent of treason but turns him over to the soldiers for execution anyway, they decide to have a little fun with him. Since Jesus thought of himself as king of the Jews, the Roman soldiers mock him by putting a royal cloak around his shoulders, a reed in his hand to mimic a shabby scepter, and a wreath of woven thorns on his forehead to counterfeit a king's golden crown.

When they've had their fun, they shuffled him off to Golgotha for crucifixion.



(Christ Plant)



(Crown of Thorns)

Also I learned that there is a soccer team called The Thorns. You probably already knew that, but it was news to me. The women's soccer team in Portland, Oregon, is called The Thorns, and when I asked Google why an accomplished, self-respecting group of athletes would call themselves The Thorns, I got a very good answer.

Portland, Oregon is known as The Rose City, so its soccer team serves as its bristling defenders and can draw blood. In 2019 The Portland Thorns set the record for attendance at a women's soccer game by playing The North Carolina Courage before 25,218 fans. That little bit of information is worthless, but at least it's free.

The holiest relics in Christendom are saints' body parts and any object which was used during Jesus' Passion, like the Holy Grail that Jesus used at The Last Supper, or the Lance that pierced his side, if you've seen Wagner's *Parsifal*.

Since about the year 400, the Christian Church has what it thought of as Jesus' original crown of thorns, which over the centuries made its way across the length and breadth of the Holy Roman Empire until The French Revolution, when it ended up at The Cathedral of Notre Dame, where it lived until April 15, 2019,

and was famously rescued in the nick of time by the Paris Fire Brigade. Right now it is safe in the Louvre.

Over the years, if a bishop wanted to do something nice for a colleague, he would snap off one of the thorns from the original crown and give it to the other bishop, so that today more than 20 churches in Europe and the United States claim to have at least one of the original thorns, including St. Peter's Cathedral in Trier, Germany, the oldest church in that land, started around the year 400. Trier of course is the namesake for New Trier Township.

“Sometimes the cruelest things happen in words and gestures that are meant to be funny: the obese child at high school, the social misfit in the classroom, the oddball on the playground.”

Well so what? Good question. When those Roman soldiers placed that spiky tiara on Jesus' forehead, they weren't using it as an instrument of torture so much as an instrument of humiliation. I guess it hurt, but not much. It was supposed to be funny.

One New Testament scholar said, “Sometimes the cruelest things happen in words and gestures that are meant to be funny: the obese child at high school, the social misfit in the classroom, the oddball on the playground.” Jesus here takes all such persons' place and suffers with them. “We have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who was in every respect tested as we are.”¹



(Jesus' original crown of thorns)

I don't know which side of the bullying equation you find yourself on—the bully or the bullied—but if you are a person of some stature and power, this story might warn us about how we treat the weaker and the smaller, like the most powerful white leaders in America mansplaining to a Black judicial nominee. Ted Cruz lecturing Ketanji Jackson about Martin Luther King. Wow.

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, vol. 2, *Matthew 13–28* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), p. 728.

I'm thinking about the little guy this morning. Perhaps you have noticed over the years that I am a vocal advocate for the Big Ten. I am jealous for the thriving of that conference. There are a lot of great Wolverines and Boilermakers here, including my wife, and I feel bad for them, and crushed that all nine Big Ten schools have been eliminated out of March Madness, but it's hard not to get excited about a tiny Jersey City Jesuit school of 2,100 first-generation commuter students thrashing a Goliath with 41,000.

A rich alumnus named Tom McMahon recently made it possible for St. Peter's to play in a proper basketball arena. Until recently they played in a shabby community center. He'd been a basketball star himself when he attended St. Peter's in 1968. When Tom McMahon played there, St. Peter's led the nation by scoring more than 90 points a game—before the three-point shot—and ran around at such a frenetic pace that they were nicknamed “Run, Baby, Run,” so guess what they call the new arena. Run, Baby, Run, Peacocks.²

It's never any fun to be mocked and humiliated, and maybe it's scant consolation to remember that Jesus took all those ignominies with him and killed them on the cross when he wore that crown of thorns as he died, but at least we have that.

If you are small, or gentle, or shy, and have been disgraced by swaggering hooligans who tried to belittle you, just remember that we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our shame. That shame is dead. It has been nailed to the cross. It's all around us still, but it does not matter anymore.

Sometimes it's our very wounds that make us useful. Sometimes the stigmata we display to the whole world are exactly what make us what God wants us to be.

A few months ago, 25 puppies from a kill shelter in Mississippi were transported to Jackson, Michigan, where the County Shelter promised to find homes for them. After a week, 24 of the 25 had found forever homes.

“I'm thinking about the little guy this morning.... Sometimes what's crooked and unfinished and awkward about us is what turns us into vessels of God's glad grace.”

There was one left. Her name was Lacey. She has a cleft lip. The caretakers at the Shelter were afraid that no one would want her.

But then a little boy named Bentley walked in and was immediately drawn to Lacey and took her home with him. Bentley had his first surgery to correct a cleft lip when he was five months old and faces several more procedures, including at least one bone graft, but he won't be alone. Lacey, with her crooked, unfinished smile, will be with him.³

Sometimes what's crooked and unfinished and awkward about us is what turns us into vessels of God's glad grace.

² Adam Kilgore, “The Miracle of Saint Peter's: How Jersey City Produced the Most Unlikely Sweet 16 Team,” *The Washington Post*, March 23, 2022.

³ Sydney Page, “A Puppy with a Cleft Lip Is Adopted by a Boy with a Cleft Lip: ‘They Instantly Loved Each Other’,” *The Washington Post*, September 10, 2020.

—Prayers of the People—

By The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Thorns appear here and there throughout the Bible, of course written for an agrarian folk, first and most famously right at the beginning, when God banishes the first man and the first woman from Eden for rebelling against God's will.

When God dispenses the punishments, the **serpent** is condemned to crawl on his belly for the rest of time, and the **woman** to painful childbirth.

For disobeying God, the first **man** is sentenced to hard work. God says, "Because you have eaten from the forbidden tree, cursed is the ground because of you. Because of you, the earth shall bring forth thorns and thistles, and you shall bring forth bread from the sweat of your face, until you return to the ground."

They say that Jesus wore the crown of thorns in order that one day the curse will end. They say he wore the hateful crown in order that all the thorns in the world might be gathered together into one place and burned in a giant bonfire or and broken into little pieces. I hope it is true.

God of morning, wake us up to a sense of wonder today in awe of the very essence of our being, connected one-to-another in the complex web of creation.

Open our eyes to your presence as the glowing embers of sunrise leave streaks of cloud across morning sky.

Rooted in meditation and contemplation, in the deep breath of prayer, we ask that you make us brave in the face of every vulnerability and fear. Protect and enfold us in the face of danger and uncertainty.

In pain, in worry, in fear, in grief, hear our groaning prayer, with sighs too deep for words. Pour out your spirit upon the whole earth, upon places of sickness and health, joy and sorrow, riches and poverty, war and peace.

We feel the polarity, the dichotomy, the disjunction of our relative safety in a war torn world. Be with Ukraine, with all those who fight an unwanted, unwelcome, harrowing war. You know the faces. You know the names. You know the worries. Be, O God. Draw near.

Be with those in the most tender places: birthing rooms and funeral parlors, hospital rooms and inpatient counseling centers, homeless shelters and courthouse hallways.

Let some semblance of peace grow between us, even here, even now, so that some piece of our hearts might melt toward those who slander and offend us, those who denigrate and dishonor us.

There are so many, Lord. For brother, sister, parent, child, friend, and neighbor. We lift up our hearts to you in the safe silence of this sanctuary, O Rock and Redeemer ... And now, let our voices join in unity as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us saying, Our Father.... Amen.