



The Most Fascinating People: Joseph of Arimathea

TEXT
Mark 15:42–47

June 21, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Cynthia Hurd, a librarian, was among those gunned down in Charleston this week. When a member of her family was asked why she was in church, she said, “Sometimes to wait from one Sunday to the next is too long.”

Mark doesn’t tell us much about Joseph of Arimathea. Some think he was a follower of Jesus; others say that is not likely.

What Mark knows of Joseph is that he was courageous. It took courage to ask for Jesus’ body. It took courage because Jesus had just been crucified as an enemy of the state. He talked about the kingdom of God all the time, but had little to say about the kingdom of Israel or of Rome, for that matter. All that talk of the kingdom of God made him a national security threat, so they put him to death.

Crucifixion kills you slowly. You linger until you no longer have the strength to pull yourself up to breathe. You suffocate under the weight of your own body.¹ Most of the time this happens while ordinary folks stand around and watch. Your last moments are brutal and dehumanizing. Crucifixion is torture, and

it is demeaning. The first step to treating someone less than human is to see him or her as less than human. When you can do that, whatever follows seems reasonable.

When it was all over, Joseph asked for his body. I don’t know if he was technically a disciple. We know that those who were his disciples were nowhere to be found. It was Joseph alone who went boldly to Pilate. It took courage to do what he did. He offered this last act of love and laid his body in a tomb. I have read that some victims of crucifixion would be left on the cross for animals to take care of things. Some would be buried just by tossing them on the ground and covering them with rocks.² Why bother with a dignified burial; everyone knew they were enemies of the state. But Joseph mustered up his courage to take the body of Jesus and bury him.

Mark notes Joseph’s courage in another way. Mark also said he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. You could wait for the kingdom of God and not be a follower of Jesus, but you can’t be a follower of Jesus unless you are waiting for the kingdom. You also could have courage and not wait for the

kingdom; but you can’t wait expectantly for the kingdom without courage.

I am moved by this moment. Joseph, holding the dead body of Jesus, carries his lifeless body to the tomb, and still he is waiting expectantly for the kingdom. It seems to me that if there were ever a moment in history when it might be difficult to trust that God’s kingdom would ever come, it would be this moment, when Jesus lies dead in Joseph’s arms.

Death deals a body blow to hope.

But Joseph, even in this moment, is waiting expectantly for the kingdom, for God’s way to live among us, for God’s life to be claimed among us.

Joseph asks Pilate for Jesus’ body. He asks for the *soma* of Jesus. *Soma* is the Greek word that means “body.” But *soma* is a complicated word because it also means “somebody.” *Soma* is not just flesh; it’s person. Joseph doesn’t just ask for his body; Joseph asks for Jesus.

But Pilate gives Joseph the *ptoma* of Jesus. *Ptoma* is a different Greek word that means “corpse,” even “carcass.” There’s a world of difference in the words. Joseph asks for Jesus; Pilate grants a carcass.

And still Joseph is waiting expectantly for the kingdom; waiting for God to do what God's going to do; expecting the ways of God to show up among us; believing the Spirit of God will heal more than we imagine. Even with Jesus' dead body, Joseph is waiting expectantly. No wonder Mark said he had courage.

I think when you are expecting the kingdom, you look death in the face. This kind of hope does not come by avoiding the brokenness of our world. This kind of hope looks the evil of this world in the eyes and declares "hate will not win." That's what Joseph did. He cared for the broken and lifeless body of Jesus because he believed God will still be God.

Twenty-nine years ago next month, on a blisteringly hot July afternoon, I was ordained as a minister of word and sacrament. I stood in the sanctuary of the Westminster Presbyterian Church, and I promised that Jesus Christ was my Lord and Savior. I promised to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination and love.³ The church prayed and the Presbytery declared I was a pastor. That was in Charleston, South Carolina, fifteen minutes from Mother Emmanuel AME church on Calhoun Street.

I admit that on that hot July afternoon, I was convinced that the kind of racial violence that had been a constant reality in the history of this nation was something we were moving past. I was convinced that racially motivated violence was

something we were leaving behind us. It was 1986, and I thought racially motivated violence was the shame of the 1960s and before, but we were more mature now.

I was embarrassingly naive.

Wednesday evening, in the Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, brothers and sisters gathered to study scripture. One family member was asked, "Why was your sister in the church that night?" He replied, "Because some weeks the time between Sundays just gets too long."

They gathered as brothers and sisters. By baptism, they are our brothers and sisters. They studied the book that told them who they were. When Christians gather, we are called the church. One metaphor the scripture uses for the church is to call us the body of Christ, the *soma* of Christ. Dylann Roof was with them. He sat with them for an hour, we understand. He heard their voices; he heard their faith. He sat at the table and perhaps even listened as they prayed. He witnessed their practice as the *soma* of Christ. And then Dylann Roof, at 21 years old — 21 years old — armed with a new gun his parents gave him for his birthday, shot the *soma* of Christ.

There are some weeks when every one of us brings the same hurt to worship. This is one of those weeks. We cannot walk through this service without naming the grief we have for our slain brothers and sisters. But the truth is, I don't know what to say today. I know you

have grief about this. And we all know that this church is a place where we, together, try to make sense of what makes no sense. We have learned that this is a place and we are a people who, while we don't have all the answers, we do help each other in the journey. The truth is, I am not sure exactly what it is I should say. I need your help today. I am trying to think my way through this, and I ask you to listen with grace.

I offer two observations.

The first is shaped by Reinhold Niebuhr, who once wrote a book titled *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. The book offers a reflection on the limited human capacity to be self-critical. Niebuhr posits that we, as individuals, have a capacity to be self-critical. Individuals have a capacity to be informed by the needs of others, by the perspective of others, and therefore can choose — sometimes against one's own self-interest — for the benefit of another. To say that in more familiar language, we can love our neighbor.

But, says Niebuhr, when we are in groups, that capacity to set aside self-interest is diminished. Groups have a harder time choosing against their own self-interest.⁴

Why am I remembering Niebuhr today? I think it is very difficult for us to be honest about who we are as a nation. So when violence like this erupts before us, we lack the capacity to know how to respond because we lack the capacity to see that this is not an aberration; this is who we are.

I do not take for granted the privilege you grant me to speak week after week. I do not take for granted the privilege you grant me to share my faith and my questions, my hopes and my trust. And I am fully aware that I am wrong, at least a little, all the time, and sometimes completely. So I share what I see today — not because I am certain I see things rightly, but because it is what I see.

I am concerned that our linking freedom with the unchecked right for everyone to have a gun is at best an immature definition of freedom and at worst has become idolatrous in this country.

The Washington Post reported this week that over the last 40 years, violent crime has declined *significantly* in this country. This is good news. However, even with this decline in crime, the U.S. remains significantly more violent than many other developed countries. Crime is down, but what has not decreased, according to *The Washington Post*, are mass shootings like the type we saw this week in Charleston.

They bear the names of Newtown and Virginia Tech, Columbine and Aurora, Colorado; the Amish town Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania; Northern Illinois University; Oikos University in Oakland; Maryville High School in Maryville, Washington. Joseph Jesse Aldridge killed seven people in Texas County, Missouri, in February; and last Palm Sunday, anti-Semitism and gun violence erupted in Overland Park, Kansas. I could go on. *The Washington Post* also cites a study that indicates substantial

evidence that the more guns there are in society, the more murders there are.⁵

I saw a report that a Mr. Cotton, a member of the NRA board, said that Rev. Clementa Pinckney was to blame for his own death and the death of his congregants because, as a South Carolina state senator, he favored background checks. Such condemnation of the victim strikes me as idolatrous.

You may disagree with these studies; there will certainly be other studies. What we have absolutely no idea how to do in this country is have a conversation about the responsibilities that accompany our freedoms. Freedom without responsibility is childish, and it will kill us. It is killing us.

Niebuhr makes sense to me here. I think it is hard for us as a nation to see who we really are, and unless that changes, we are going to see more innocent blood spilled. It will happen again. This kind of violence will happen again.

A second observation: I have always admired Joseph of Arimathea because, in the moment when human history had seemingly no reason to trust that the kingdom of God would come, Joseph was waiting expectantly. I yearn for such courage.

This week, I saw that courage on our TV screen. Dylann Roof sat in a Bible study and, with precision, drew his gun on nine brothers and sisters in the faith, the *soma of Jesus*, studying the word. They died. And then the children of Joseph of Arimathea showed up.

We saw mothers and brothers, children and grandmothers of the slain. We heard a mother weep for her son, just graduated from college. Some of you have grieved the loss of your own children. You know something of her pain.

We heard families weep with grief and shock. Some of you have faced death's coming in shocking fashion; you know something of their pain.

But then these family members mustered up the courage to speak the gospel. They spoke of forgiveness. They declared, "Hate will not win; we have no room for hate."

Dylann Roof said he wanted to create a race war, and he broke their hearts. But from their broken hearts, it was not hatred that spilled out, but hope. The fractures of their hearts did not give birth to violence, but to love. We heard the voices of those who trust that God will do what God has promised to do. And they declared hatred will not win. They spoke as the children of Joseph of Arimathea because that's what it looks like to wait expectantly for the kingdom of God.

And here's the thing. That didn't just happen. The only way they knew to talk like that — the only way they could see this tragedy through the eyes of human compassion; the only way they knew how to walk through the valley of the shadow with hope — is they knew that it can be a long time from one Sunday to the next, so they carried this gospel with them.

They bathed themselves in the story of Jesus. They claimed

the promise of their baptism. They wrapped themselves in the teachings of Jesus, as if they knew that the day would come when they would have to choose to walk toward that kingdom.

If we are going to heal, we are going to need this story. Your being in this place on this morning matters. If we are going to heal, we need to wrap ourselves in this story; we need to bathe ourselves in these teachings.

Your being in this place matters because it is here that we remind ourselves that we are the *soma* of Christ. We are the children of Joseph of Arimathea.

It will be a long time before next Sunday gets here, so carry this story with you.

¹Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, Anchor Bible (2009), pp. 1131–1133

²Ibid.

³These are just two of the Constitutional Questions every pastor, elder and deacon in the PCUSA answer at the time of ordination.

⁴Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), introduction

⁵Max Ehrenfreund and Zachary Goldfarb, *The Washington Post*, “11 essential facts about guns and mass shootings in the United States,” June 18, 2015

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.