

"He Could Have Saved Himself"

Sermon for Passion Sunday

Lectionary Year C

March 28, 2010

Texts: Luke 22:14-23:56; Philippians 2:5-11

Dr. David T. Howeth

He could have saved himself. He had the power. As the only begotten Son of God, having equality with God, and being in every way the same as God—Jesus could have saved himself. That's what other people had suggested that he do long before the cross. When Jesus first tried to explain to his disciples the necessity of his being crucified, Peter tried to talk Jesus into avoiding the cross. At the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus was offered that same option by Satan. The devil was willing to hand over to Jesus all the kingdoms of the world without his having to suffer. Even before that, as Paul reminds us, Christ had the opportunity not to empty himself and never to become human at all, but instead to exploit his equality with God, to take the easy way out.

And at the end of his life as he hangs on the cross, the religious leaders taunt Jesus by saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his Chosen One!" One of the criminals crucified next to Christ chimes in. "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" Even one of the Roman soldiers offers Jesus sour wine and yells up to him, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" It seems that *everyone suggests this same possibility*. Jesus would have been well within his rights to save himself and certainly would have met the expectations of people if he had. Who could blame him? Why die

when you have the power not to? Jesus could have saved himself from death and from a lot of other unpleasant things as well.

He could have saved himself from the frustration of dealing with the disciples. I urge you to read the passion account from Luke's Gospel this week. One thing that is obvious in it is how weak, thick-headed, and self-centered the disciples were, in other words, a lot like us. Were these the best people Jesus could find to work with? That these particular people became the founders of our faith has a lot more to say about the grace of God than it does about human strength and ability.

What do we see the disciples doing in the passion story? Just the usual stuff—disputing among themselves over which one of them is the greatest, while Jesus is trying to serve them the Last Supper and explain to them one more time the meaning of his death. And when Jesus goes to the Mount of Olives to pray, the disciples are right there with him, providing him with emotional support and encouragement in his hour of need. Right? Wrong. They are sacked out, not able to stay awake through his agony. Then Jesus is arrested and taken away. Of course the disciples stand up for him at his trial, giving eyewitness testimony to his teaching, his miracles, and his acts of healing. Not hardly. They run and hide, and their leader, Simon Peter, publicly denies three times even knowing Jesus. Why didn't Jesus save himself the frustration of trying to pour himself into such shallow and stubborn and insignificant people as the disciples?

Surely the most painful part of dealing with the disciples was the out and out betrayal by one of them, Judas. Jesus must have known from the beginning that this one had the potential for evil. Yet he keeps

Judas with him, allows him to be the group's treasurer, and serves him communion along with all the other disciples on that night. Why didn't Jesus save himself the abuse of betrayal by a kiss from one such as Judas?

Jesus could have saved himself the agonizing struggle of his prayer at the Mount of Olives. He prays to God that he might be spared having to die. Jesus prays so hard he sweats blood. It's a prayer of anguish so deep that it's beyond our comprehension. Who can imagine choosing to die for the sins of the world? Who of us could say in the face of such a prospect for God's will to be done rather than ours? Jesus could have saved himself the agony of his struggle to be obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

He could have saved himself from the humiliation at the hands of those who arrested him, tried him, and later watched him die. In Luke's account of the passion story, we see how badly Jesus is treated before his actual crucifixion. He is blindfolded and mocked and beaten by the Jewish authorities. He is dressed up like a king and made fun of by Herod's soldiers. He is whipped nearly to death by Pilate's guard. Once he is hung on the cross, naked, Jesus is insulted over and over again by the crowd. They throw dice to see who would get to keep his clothes.

The Romans hang a sign over his head that reads, "This is the King of the Jews," as a cruel joke. Why didn't Jesus save himself from all this humiliation? He certainly could have.

He could have saved himself the injustice of the outcome of a rigged trial with trumped-up charges. It is a kangaroo court that decides Jesus' fate. He is dragged before the Sanhedrin, then Pilate,

then Herod, then Pilate again. There is no justice, no mercy, no fairness, no grace, no pardon, even though it is clear he is innocent. There is only a swift execution for political purposes. Keep the people happy; satisfy the religious hierarchy; protect the status quo; make sure power and control remain intact no matter what the cost. Jesus himself gets rendered unto Caesar. Politics kill the Christ of God. Why didn't he save himself from what we to this day recognize as institutionalized evil?

Jesus could have saved himself the rejection of having the people choose Barabbas over him. What a low blow that must have been. Pilate allows the people to select a prisoner to be set free, and whom do they pick? They pick this revolutionary who committed murder in the name of his cause. Maybe he meets their expectations more than Jesus does. Maybe that's what the people really wanted in a Messiah, an insurrectionist who would lead an armed revolt against Rome. Jesus wouldn't defend himself when he was arrested. He even healed the ear of the slave of the high priest after one of Jesus' disciples cut it off when the religious leaders came to capture him. It's no wonder the people rejected him. But why did Jesus even try to be the Messiah, knowing that he would not be what the people wanted? He could have saved himself the awful pain of their rejection.

He could have saved himself the misery, torture, and loneliness of dying in such a horrible manner. There is no worse way to die than on a cross. It's a brutal, miserable death, so much so that the Romans came up with a special term to describe the pain that comes about as a result of the agony of crucifixion: *excruciating*. Only the magnitude of Jesus' previous torture made his death easier, because he died more

quickly on the cross than most people did. But worse than the physical pain must have been the emotional pain of being abandoned by his friends and the spiritual pain of being forsaken and abandoned even by God. All who knew him, who followed him, and who loved him, keep their distance from him. Jesus dies absolutely alone, in the darkness of solitude.

Why? Why? Why? Why would he endure such things? Why would he allow himself to suffer so, to be abused so, to be rejected so, to be betrayed so, to be tortured so, to be treated so unjustly, to be killed in such a way as this? Why? For what reason in all the world would Jesus go through all this?

Love. Love. Love. Pure, unbounded love. Unconditional, completely self-giving love. Sacrificial love. Passionate love for you. That's the reason. He did it for you. Do you realize that? Can you comprehend that? Can you appropriate that? Jesus suffered and died for you, for no other reason than he loves you enough to go through all the pain and torment one human being can bear. He loves you enough to die for you, to die instead of you, to die on your behalf, to put to death once and for all the sin that separates you from God. He died so that you might live. God in Christ loves you that much.

And because he went through all he did for you, because he could have saved himself but didn't because of you, "God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

I invite you to do just that this week: to bend your knee and

confess with your tongue that Jesus Christ is Lord. For that is what we come to the table to do, and you will have the opportunity to do that this Thursday night, Holy Thursday, as we present the "Last Supper Tableau" and take communion together. On that night we will gather to remember that his body was not spared; it was broken for us. We will worship together to recall that the cup of his blood was not passed; it was poured out for the forgiveness of sins and to establish a new covenant with God. And so I ask you please to come that night to the table and eat and drink of the One who could have saved himself, but for your sake and for mine he chose not to.