

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH
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SCRIPTURE: *Mark 15:39-47*

DATE: *September 4, 2022*

SERMON: *“A Diverse Group”*

BILL: Good morning! This will be the third time in the past year that the three of us have come together to bring the morning message. If you’ve been here for both of those, you may recall that we’ve allowed Shaun to open, to get things started. But both times he’s abused this privilege by making some crack about “Two Old Guys and A Young Good-Looking Guy” being up here, and by taking such liberty he’s ended up losing his opening privileges.

In all seriousness, we very much enjoy working together and we really look forward to doing this team preaching when the opportunity presents itself.

Shaun: Yes, we do enjoy this, in fact, it was about a year ago that the three of us did this for the first time. It was late August when school was starting back up, and what that meant back then, and what it means today, a year later, is that summer is coming to an end.

Ray: And as summer winds down, it’s a good time to reflect and acknowledge what a good summer it has been for us here at Five Forks Church. We’ve had fun, as we’ve come together for **pot-lucks, paint events, pool parties** and **baseball games**. We’ve come together in order to get behind and help support meaningful projects such as the **Student Missions Trip**.

Most important, we’ve been learning and growing together, many of you taking advantage of discipleship opportunities not just over the summer, but all year long.

Some of you have been taking advantage of the more traditional opportunities such as Sunday School classes and At-Home Bible Studies.

Shaun: And many of you are also taking advantage of the two new discipleship opportunities that have just started this year: the **Sermon Lab** that meets down in the Café after the morning services...and the **BibleProject** videos that we look at each week.

It's been a good summer, it's been a good year, and while the three of us are up here, it just seems like a good time to tell you how much we appreciate you and appreciate you allowing us – along with Chris and Brady – to serve as your pastors.

Bill: This morning's message is titled **A Diverse Group**, and as I look out over this room, I imagine we have a pretty diverse group of people here. I think this morning we have those among us with very little background when it comes to God...very little knowledge or experience when it comes to who God is and what He's all about. We shouldn't be surprised by the fact that we have some in this room who perhaps doubt or even deny the existence of God. The truth is we should be warm and welcoming to those who may not believe what many of us believe.

Shaun: That's right Bill, and also part of this diverse group would be those that we might say are on the fringe. Some of you here this morning do believe in God, you're following Jesus, but still, you feel as if you're on the outside, not really feeling like a part of our church family. And one thing we'll be talking about this morning is the importance of including everyone in the life of the church.

Ray: Finally, we realize that there are many gathered here this morning who are active here at the church...more than that, you believe in God and you have a good grasp on how God calls us to live. As so as Bill said, we have here this morning a pretty diverse group of people.

Bill: And this diverse group pertains not only to our gathering here this morning, but also to a group of people gathered on a hill about 2000 years ago. All four gospels –

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – provide an account of this diverse group who were present as Jesus was being crucified. However this morning we're going to be looking primarily at the account found in Mark's gospel, chapter 15, beginning with verse 39. It's just before this that Jesus had taken His final breath. As I read, see if you can identify some who make up this diverse group that we'll be looking at this morning.

Mark 15:39- 47 And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

⁴⁰ Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome. ⁴¹ In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.

⁴² It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached, ⁴³ Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. ⁴⁴ Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. ⁴⁵ When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. ⁴⁶ So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. ⁴⁷ Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid.

So how did you do? Shaun, how did *you* do? Give me one person or group that was there on the hill that day.

Shaun: The first person mentioned was **the Roman centurion**.

Bill: Good...anything stand out to you?

Shaun: Well, he just gets a brief mention...but what *is* there seems pretty significant, and raises some questions...so it's definitely worth looking at.

Bill: And we'll do that...but first, Ray...what other individual or group do we see in this passage?

Ray: We have **a number of women**...Two Mary's...Magdalene and also Mary, the mother of James and Joseph...Salome...and a number of other women who are not named.

Bill: Same question that I asked Shaun...anything stand out?

Ray: We're given a little more detail here than were given with the Roman centurion...we have names, for instance...where they stood while on the hill...also a little background on the relationship they had with Jesus over the course of the previous years.

Bill: Good...and so now I'm looking for one more individual or group that is found here in Mark's gospel...I'll look to you here in the room...one more...who is it?

Good, that's right, **Joseph of Arimathea**. And there's more written about him than there was for the centurion and for the women. So...as you look at this group, what, if anything catches your attention?

Ray: Well, like Bill's been saying, it's the diversity of this group. Three different classes of people...a Roman Centurion, with little knowledge of the God of the Jews...a group of Jewish women who in that culture would have been kept on the fringe...and a man of prominence who would have been deeply immersed in the Jewish religious culture. And it makes me wonder if this is intentional on Mark's part, as if he's bringing to light all of these different people from different classes, in order to share with us their common response to what is happening.

Bill: A diverse group of people gathered on that hill...a diverse group of people gathered in this room and throughout this community...and so let's spend what time we have taking a closer look at these folks, particularly to see their response to what has

just taken place before them...and let me just encourage you to be open to whatever kind of response God might be looking for from you.

Shaun: So let's start with...

A. THE ROMAN CENTURION

And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

Mark 15:39

As I said earlier, what we read here is very brief, just in a single verse, but here's what we know...because he is a centurion, he's no common foot soldier. He would have been the senior officer on the scene, that is, he would have been in charge of overseeing Jesus' crucifixion...from the walk up the hill to the nailing of the feet and hands to maintaining crowd control the whole time that Jesus hangs on the cross.

Ray: But even more significant is the fact that he is a Roman. This means that because of his background, because of his upbringing, he probably would have believed in a wide array of Roman gods...it's likely that he would have seen Caesar as some kind of deity...but his knowledge of the God of the Jews would probably have been quite limited.

It even makes me wonder what he would have known about Jesus...would he have been aware of this groundswell of popularity that had unfolded in recent years...would he have been taken aback by this groundswell of opposition that had unfolded just that week? Regardless of what he knew or didn't know, he suddenly finds himself having been given charge of overseeing the execution of this man who claims to be the Son of this God that the Jews believe in.

Bill: And just a bit ago, Shaun mentioned how one part of his job would be to oversee crowd control, and while this would have been part of his duties, some of you are aware of how chaotic things became, and not because of the crowd.

You see, Matthew – in his gospel – describes how the sky grew dark for 3 hours, and he describes how the earth began to shake to the point where rocks began splitting...and Matthew describes how the centurion and other soldiers became terrified at what was happening, and it's not hard to see why. Unexplainable darkness hovering overhead in the middle of the day, while the ground is shaking violently beneath their feet.

And so as we read Mark's account and he doesn't really describe or capture the intensity of the moment like Matthew does. But what is the most significant thing in all of this is the centurion's reaction, his response once Jesus dies. It says ***“when he heard his cry and saw how he died”***...it led him to exclaim what? ***“Surely this man was the Son of God!”***

Shaun: Something was stirred within him that caused him to say these words. What he really meant and where it went from there, we don't know for sure. What we do know is that what he saw and heard led him to say something “positive”. His heart and mind had opened up to the point that he realized that something significant was unfolding before him.

And I'd just like to say to those in this room or those watching on line who have very little in the way of background when it comes to the Bible and God and Jesus...no matter what it is that brought you here this morning, as Bill said before, we're glad you are here and hope that you are being made to feel welcome. Because you are.

And it is our hope that what you hear here and what you see here will have a positive impact on you. That you will realize that something significant happened on that hill 2000 years ago, and maybe you'll want to know more about that. Maybe you'll see something positive in the lives of those that you know here in this church or in this community who have become followers of Jesus, and you'll be open to the positive impact that Jesus can have on your life.

Bill: Any of us would love to enter into a conversation with you where you can share with us about your background...your upbringing...your experiences, positive or

negative that have played a part in shaping what you believe. Everybody has a story, and we'd love to hear yours. Please reach out to any of us so we can set up a time to talk.

Ray: Okay, so in addition to the centurion, we have a second group that we read about here in Mark's gospel...

B. A NUMBER OF WOMEN

Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome.

In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs.

Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.

Mark 15:40-41

I said earlier, we're given specific names of some of those who made up this group of women...**two Mary's, Salome, other women**. We're told that they were **actual followers of Jesus**. But perhaps the thing that stands out the most is their location...as Mark tells us that they are **"watching from a distance."**

Some on the hill that day may have stood at a distance by their own choosing. And some may have been *kept* at a distance for various reasons. But these words sum up in a very concise and accurate way, the fact that women in that culture were often kept on the fringe...at a distance...from the mainstream of life, whether it be educational, political or religious life.

Bill: C.S. Lewis once wrote an essay called **"The Inner Ring"**, and he writes about how one of the deepest desires of the human heart is to get inside the inner ring...**to be accepted into whatever group that matters to us at that time**.

And I'll bet we can all come up with at least one example from personal experience. For instance, back when you were in school, wasn't there an inner ring that just about everyone wanted to be a part of? Made up of the most popular, the most athletic and the most attractive? First team...first chair...among the first to be picked, to be elected,

to be invited. Those in the inner ring would hang out together during lunch, between classes, after school. It wasn't hard to recognize who was in and who was out, was it?

Shaun: It even plays out once we become adults. Some of you may be in work environments where an inner ring exists. Who is invited to do this, and who isn't? Who is included in this, and who isn't?

Lewis is quick to point out that some inner rings are unavoidable...some people have to lead, and there is nothing wrong with being a part of a leadership team or committee. But what Lewis is saying is that we all have this longing to get inside the inner ring because if we can get in, we feel important...it means we matter. Because if we don't get in, we think it means we don't matter...and that's a bad place to be.

Ray: And so 2000 years ago gathered there on the hill were a number of women who knew what it was like to be kept at a distance...outside the inner ring of that culture. And yet all four of the gospels describe how these women are found present during the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. For instance, we not only see them present there on the hill, but did you pick up on the fact that the two Mary's went to the tomb and saw where Jesus body had been laid?

Mark 15:47 Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid.

And many of you know that it was these women who were the first to see the Risen Jesus on that first Easter morning.

Bill: Yes, and so this is important. On the one hand, in our brokenness we create and maintain these inner rings where we determine who's in and who's out. You find them in the schools, at the workplace, and unfortunately, sometimes in the church. And so if you're a follower of Jesus and yet you have not felt welcomed into the life of the church here at Five Forks, we apologize for any barriers we have set up or any attitudes we have displayed.

As I was thinking about this, I was asking myself “What barriers or attitudes might be present here?”...and I guess the comment I’ve heard expressed most often is the barrier people feel when they have not been born and raised here in Franklin County.

We have a certain culture here, as does every county throughout the United States. Some cultures are fast paced, some are slower...some are city, some are country...some are welcoming (you’ve heard the expression “Southern Hospitality”)...some may be less so.

Shaun: And so this example that Bill is giving us serves as a good reminder for us...we’re country, not city, and that’s not going to change. But what we can do is make sure that when someone comes into this church community, we welcome them regardless of where they are from, how they dress, how they speak, what they believe. If it’s truly our desire for others to come to know and follow Jesus, then we need to make sure they know this is a place where they are welcome, and it’s our hope that they will see that Jesus is present here.

Bill: And sometimes welcoming others in will be smooth, and sometimes it might be more challenging. I think back to when I first came to this church back in the early 80’s and how smooth it was...how quickly I was welcomed into this fellowship right from the start, and I know there are several reasons for that. For one, I was born and raised in this area, more than that, I had family who were already immersed in the life of this church. “Bill Shank, yes that’s Judy Reitz’s brother.” That helped to be sure.

But perhaps most significant was the fact that I played and followed sports, and there were a group of guys my age who also played and followed sports, and so right from the start I was invited to join them for basketball, softball...I can even remember going bowling at times. And by doing so became involved in the overall life of the church, and eventually made the decision to become a follower of Jesus.

Ray: It makes me wonder though, Bill, how things might have went if you didn’t have family here, or if you didn’t play sports. Would you have found yourself as quickly immersed in the life of the church here?

I think this just serves as a reminder to those of us who are active here at Five Forks, to be looking for those who may not have family here, who may not have common interests, at least that we know of.

And so what I'd like to do is make a suggestion for us to begin to practice. Just like all of us live in some sort of neighborhood, with neighbors on our left and on our right...neighbors across the hall or across the street, neighbors behind us....we also have a neighborhood here at the church.

It's where you're sitting right now. And if you are one who attends regularly, then you're probably sitting in the same seat that you sat in last week and last month and last year. And you have neighbors on your right, left, in front of you and behind you. How well do you know them? Do you know if they have family that attends here? Do know what they do for a living, where they live, and what their interests are?

I'd like to encourage us as a church to become intentional about getting to know those around you that you don't know....and perhaps this is one way that we can help each other become involved in the life of this church...as we become a close-knit community of Jesus' followers.

Bill: Good suggestion Ray. Okay, so far we have looked at two different classes of people...a Roman centurion who would have little knowledge of the Living God...and a group of women who were Jesus' followers but were kept at a distance in that culture. There's one more person that Mark brings out in his gospel, a man who is absolutely a part of the inner ring that existed at that time, his name was...

C. JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA

Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body.

Mark 15:43

So what do we know about this man? First thing we see is that he is **“a prominent member of the Council.”** Prominent...*Powerful*...a member of this Council made up of the most highly respected religious leaders of that day. To the degree that the Roman centurion would have been ignorant of the God of Israel, Joseph would have been fully aware of all God’s commandments and would have been intent on obeying them.

Shaun: There’s something else about Joseph though...something important that Mark does not bring out here, but John does in his gospel account. John tells us...

John 19:38b Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews.

Joseph is a follower of Jesus...but at that time, in that place, this was very risky. Because among his peer group, most of the Jewish religious leaders saw Jesus as a blasphemer worthy of death because of His claim to be God’s Son.

Ray: But suddenly for Joseph, something changed. For the first time he was willing to come out in the open...willing to say out loud what he had been saying in secret. Did you pick up on what it said in verse 43? It says that Joseph...

Mark 15:43 ...went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body.

He went boldly. This took a tremendous amount of courage and risk. Because the risk wasn’t limited to just his peer group...the others on the Council. The risk also involved the Romans. They were the ones who carried out the execution of Jesus, charging Him with this claim to be king of the Jews, which would be treason...and there was no room for any king other than Caesar.

Bill: And so what we see here a major attitude shift for Joseph. His attitude toward power had suddenly changed.

Doesn't it seem like a lot of what's wrong in the world today has to do with this desire for power. To get it. To increase it. And if you get it, to not let it go. I'm sure it was the same back then...the seduction of power has been present since the garden.

But look closely at Joseph...he's willing to give it up, by going to Pilate and asking for Jesus' body. Very risky. It's going to cost him something. Maybe not his life, but it will endanger his position on the Council. He might find himself outside of the inner ring. There's a noticeable shift in Joseph's attitude, in his identity. No longer keeping silent, but now bold about what he really thinks about Jesus.

Shaun: And not just more bold, but also more humble. Look at verse 46 which says...

Mark 15:46 So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock.

Easy to miss what's happening here. In ancient Palestine, bodies wouldn't be embalmed, but they would be washed, wrapped and anointed before being placed in a tomb. And so this is what Joseph and his friend Nicodemus are doing. But there's a problem. The sun is going down, which means the Sabbath is about to begin, and they don't have time to complete this task. This is why the women were going back to the tomb early on that first Easter morning, to finish what had been started just before the Sabbath.

Ray: We read verse 46 and it all seems so clean and proper doesn't it? What is often overlooked is what came first, and that is the taking down of Jesus' body from the cross. This would have been a stomach turning task, as Jesus' body would have been badly mutilated...beaten, thorns, nails, speared. Who would be responsible for this kind of work?

Certainly not someone who is part of the inner ring. This was not a job for the prominent, for the wealthy, for the powerful. And yet Joseph does it. More than that, he *wants* to do it.

Bill: Yes, this would have been highly inappropriate in that culture. But for Joseph, his reputation, his status, his power is no longer important...he has lost his lust for the inner ring.

And so what we see here in Mark's gospel is an account of a very diverse group made up of people from different backgrounds, different classes...and yet all three of these that we have looked at respond in a positive manner to this horrific scene that has unfolded before their eyes.

And that is really startling, because here on this first day of the weekend, all that is before them is death and defeat. Imagine what kind of response they will have on the 3rd day, when Jesus is resurrected and showing everyone that He has defeated death.

It's not too hard to envision Joseph becoming more bold and more humble, is it?

Shaun: It's not hard at all to envision these women following Jesus with even more love, more commitment, no matter what the cultural norms might be.

Ray: And it's not hard to envision the Roman centurion being filled with questions and thirsting for more background on this man that he witnessed dying, who was now alive.

Bill: And as we said back at the beginning, just as we read about this diverse group in Mark's gospel, we acknowledge that there is a diverse group of folks here today. And what we want to leave you with is this...not just an awareness of how Jesus died, but also, how Jesus lived. Three years prior to this incredible weekend Jesus walked among us...God Himself walked among us...and for three years taught...by His words and by His actions how we are to live. As a community, not individually. Not for our own good, but for the well-being of everyone. No inner rings, no barriers, no attitudes that would convey a sense of "I'm in and you're out."

Shaun: We talk about this a lot here at Five Forks...what it looks like to be a follower of Jesus...where we all see ourselves in need of God's grace, whether we are just starting

to understand what this means, or whether we have been immersed in the life of the church for as long as we can remember.

We're here for each other, for the outsiders, for those who have been kept at a distance, for those who come to see that prominence and power is not the message behind the gospel, rather, it is humbling ourselves and serving Jesus by serving others.

Ray: And so, if this resonates with you, thank you for being a part of this diverse community, and please invite others – no matter their background, their appearance, their status. Look to invite anyone who you think might be interested in becoming a part of this community of Jesus followers here at Five Forks.