
MALCHUS
JOHN 18:1-12; 19:38-42
A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON GOOD FRIDAY, MARCH 29, 2024
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Jesus and his disciples were in a garden and gardens can surely be beautiful like Duke Gardens but the Gospel of John reveals that gardens can be brutal too. There are weeds in gardens and in the garden of God there are also wounds. Gruesome acts can occur in gardens. The Bible shows that genesis falls happen in gardens. Gardens, as John reveals, are places for a resurrection but also for crucifixions. What do I mean?

I mean look at what happened to Malchus. Who? Malchus. “Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus.”

I have an admission to make tonight. I grew up in the church. I've been to seminary. I'm a professor in theological education. I've heard the Gospel of John read many times and I've preached from John myself. But I have to be honest. I never heard this dude's name before—Malchus. Or, maybe I heard it but never really listened to it, never really paid him any mind. I only cared about the holy headliners, the significant figures like Jesus and Judas and Simon Peter and Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. Not a high priest's slave named Malchus.

I have to offer an apology. I'm sorry Malchus, really sorry. I didn't even know you existed. Your name, your life, never stood out to me which means your life didn't matter to me. I'm sorry because your human life mattered like every other human being, even if you had a lower social status as a slave.

This is the only time in the entire 66 books of the Bible that we hear his name, so I want to say it and you to hear it—Malchus! The other Gospels tell the story in a similar way but don't name him.

He's already a slave and yet he's the one on whom violence is enacted. He's already down and pushed down even further. This is not March Madness; this is Malchus Madness. When innocent ones are brutalized, caught in the crossfire at parks, when just standing or playing there. An ear cut off or a bullet in a limb. They have no power or privilege or protection but are just caught in a gruesome garden's grasp with nowhere to run or nowhere to hide.

After all these years, how could we forget or ignore Malchus after what he experienced at the hands of a disciple, a follower of Jesus?

I call his name—Malchus—to remember him and all of the innocent victims of violence in the world, just doing their job or driving down the road or walking to school or sleeping in their bed or attending a concert. Some might argue that he was a part of the angry civic and religious mob that came to arrest Jesus, but he had no choice. He was a high priest's slave. And even our worst enemies, which he wasn't, don't deserve to receive violence. This is not a botanical garden; this is a maniacal one.

His name is the sermon title, so we remember him, so we remember those often overlooked or forgotten, those whose names we don't know or ever say, those who work menial jobs because they have to and have no other options. I remember them.

This is Malchus memory. Put his name in neon lights, engrain it on your brain, place it on a post-it note on your heart, write it in your journals, print it on your T-shirts, have it as a screensaver on your computer, text it to friends and family, a name only mentioned once in scripture, a slave's name, a human being's name no one ever remembers. What better night to do it than Good Friday night when just last night we remembered Jesus telling his disciples about his impending death by violence and asking them to remember him through a meal of broken bread and poured wine—‘do this in remembrance of me’?

So tonight, because of Jesus, we remember all who suffer broken bodies and cut off ears. We remember the Malchus's of the world because of Jesus. It can be difficult to remember when the church and its services can seem so pristine and perfect with its ancient well-manicured liturgies or multicolored lights with its cool band music or the erasure of the so-called blood hymns from many songbooks. It's easy to forget the victims of violence, including Jesus and Malchus, when our worship services and spiritual practices lure us away from the pain and agony of humanity in the world as we unfortunately praise political ideology more than a crucified God.

But the passion narratives as in the Gospel of John call us to remember the suffering ones and the suffering Christ, not condoning violence but recognizing it as a fact of this broken world and even of the Christian life. What's striking in the scriptures is that even followers of Jesus can do wrong and be devious, friends can turn their back on you, those you sacrificed for may sacrifice you—Judas betrays Jesus and Peter enacts violence on Malchus. The ones who you expect to be the most Christ-like may be the ones who perpetuate the most evil. As the Rev. Howard Thurman wrote in his book, *Luminous Darkness*, “because a person is a Christian is no indication what his attitude may be toward me in any given circumstance.” We, Christians, followers of Jesus, are indicted tonight and must check ourselves before we wreck ourselves. None of us is innocent before the cross—as the hymn says, “Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?/Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee!/'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee;/I crucified thee.”

What's even more striking is that in John when Peter uses his sword to cut off the right ear of Malchus, Jesus only tells Peter to put his sword back into his sheath. There is no healing of Malchus's ear. In the Gospel of Luke, we hear that the ear was healed but not in John's passion narrative. There is no healing in the moment. Malchus suffers and it's as if John wants us to sit a while with the fact of human suffering due to senseless acts of violence. We have to sit with the fact that one of Jesus' favorite disciples, Peter, acted violently against a slave. We have to sit and watch the blood flowing from Malchus and not rush to the healing, not race to a resolution or solution or even reconciliation because sometimes when you rush, you skip over the reality of truth and skip over honesty and skip over justice and skip over the pain and skip over lament. Perhaps, we just need to sit with the angst and agony in the garden of hurt and disappointment and disbelief. Perhaps we just have to lie on our hospital beds for months at a time, and for some, years, not knowing when it will all be over. Malchus memory challenges us to not skip into Easter so quickly without taking the suffering of Good Friday seriously. It's a call to sit in the garden at the foot of the cross because there is no resurrection without the crucifixion.

We need to sit with Malchus in his bloody pain and wait for his healing because Jesus died for him too and for all of those caught in the crossfire of violence, for those who have no choice and no power but are victims of violence just because they were at the wrong place at the wrong time—in Israel, in Gaza, in Ukraine, in Russia, in Haiti, in Durham.

Jesus shows us that it's time to put away our swords because it's a time for peace, and no one ever wins a fight anyway. The cross Jesus endured for our sake is enough violence in the world for eternity. He drank the cup of suffering as he carried the weight of the world on his body, and he has wounds to show for it—our wounds. What happens to Jesus is what happens to all innocent victims. But observing the world through his suffering body helps us to see the suffering bodies of all of God's children. This is why I remember Malchus because I remember the suffering Jesus and Jesus wants us to remember, respect, and love human beings like Malchus. His name isn't the name above every name like Jesus, but may we never forget the name Malchus. May we even begin a Malchus ministry where we not only remember the victims of violence but honor their dignity by nurturing and encouraging nonviolence while seeking their healing. The cross is an ancient violent tool of torture but the cross of Christ in the light of Christ is a call for the end of all violence, a call for the day as the prophets would say when we beat our swords into ploughshares, a call to undying love. Jesus died that death and violence would die. So put away your swords, for Malchus's sake, for Christ's sake. The cross is enough. Were you there? We are there.

‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom, but please, oh please, remember Malchus too.’