

Midweek 5
Hands of Brutality (Soldiers)
Sermon Text: Matthew 27:27-31

Mom and Dad took pride that they had raised a happy kid. She was ten years old now and growing into a decent young lady. It was during her fifth grade year, though, that her parents began to notice a change in personality. The youthful exuberance, her joy for life, and the permanent smile on her face gave way to sullenness. During that school year she grew increasingly distant. Her parents approached her. They took an interest; they asked, “What’s wrong?” and said, “It’s okay to talk about it.” The behavior continued. It wasn’t until the bruises started showing up that they called a meeting with the school principal. Only after hours of prodding did their daughter break down crying, admitting that she was being bullied by a group of mean girls in school.

Bullying is such a widespread and real problem that our government has set up a website, www.stopbullying.gov. It happens in our classrooms, it happens between spouses in our homes, in the workplace, on the subway. The site describes bullying as a pattern of behavior that is used to leverage power or control over another. It identifies three types of bullying. Verbal bullying involves name calling and threats of violence. Social bullying happens when a person is deliberately excluded or ostracized from a group, or others are encouraged not to befriend someone. Physical bullying occurs when property is damaged as a threat of further violence, or when you actually lay your hands on someone else by pushing, kicking, tripping, or using your fists to fight.

If you accept the website’s description as accurate, then we’d have to admit that Jesus was the victim of all three types of bullying during his time on earth. His enemies, primarily religious enemies like the Pharisees and Sadducees, routinely engaged in patterns of verbal bullying. Their regular attempts to catch Jesus with a “gotcha” question is just one example. There was also the social bullying. Jewish leaders discouraged people from following Jesus, spread rumors about him, and tried to embarrass him publicly. After reading Matthew’s words, Jesus’ physical bullying is unmistakable. What happened at the Praetorium goes way beyond bullying to utter contempt and outright assault.

It’s one thing for a socially awkward teenager to leverage a growth spurt to steal an underclassman’s lunch money, or for a jealous fifth grader to bully the teacher’s pet. It is entirely another thing to bludgeon a man nearly to death for the heinous crime of preaching forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Throughout his ministry Jesus was bullied verbally and socially. Beginning late Holy Thursday evening the physical violence escalated. Tonight, we see Jesus suffer the soldiers’ . . .

Hands of Brutality

What Matthew records for us is actually the second instance of the hands of brutality in the Passion History. Jesus was now in the custody of the Roman governor, but in the early darkness of Friday morning, the Jewish leaders had conducted their own kangaroo court where they abused him similarly. At their illegal meeting, the Jews were trying to manufacture evidence to sentence Jesus to death but couldn’t make anything stick. In their volatile zealotry, they stopped trying to pin blame on him and just mocked him mercilessly. These church leaders blindfolded

Jesus, slapped him across the face, and demanded he identify the man who hit him. They blasphemed against him, spit in his face, and sent him on to Pontius Pilate.

Pilate interviewed Jesus and was determined to set him free. But Pilate was a politician first and a humanitarian second. The angry mob of Jews screaming that Jesus be crucified pressured Pilate into taking this action. Perhaps if Jesus were brutalized the Roman way, the Jews' blind rage would be placated and Pilate could release an innocent man. So he handed him over to his whole company of soldiers—an estimated 600 men—to do their worst (v. 27).

The first thing the soldiers did was to whip Jesus' naked back. This lead-tipped whip was called a flagrum, and it was designed to break open the skin, cause massive bleeding and internal injury, and weaken the person so he couldn't resist any further punishment. This scourging was so violent that the Jews limited the number of lashes a person could receive. But Jesus was in the hands of the Romans now, and they had no such limit. A cruel piece of irony, this treatment was so tortuous that many considered it to be an act of mercy. You were so weakened by the beatings that you'd die more quickly when crucified.

For a Roman soldier, being stationed in Judea was like being sent to the end of the world. There was nothing to do. Putting up with the Jews was a pain. Their constant religious infighting was enough to make a soldier quit. They had to get their entertainment somehow, and Jesus served that purpose. After his brutal whipping, the soldiers turned to ridicule. The Jews' whole case against Jesus revolved around his claim to be a king. Playing to an approving Jewish crowd, the Romans threw a scarlet robe on him—probably a soldier's coat. They twisted together a bramble of thorns and pressed it into his skull as though it were a crown. They placed a stick of some kind into his weakened hands, and **“they knelt down before him and mocked him. ‘Hail, king of the Jews’”** (v. 29). The company of soldiers took turns spitting on him and beating him over the head again and again. And with every blow of the flagrum, with every spray of spit, with every taunt and jeer Jesus fulfilled God's Word. **“I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting”** (Isa 50:6).

There are a lot of aggressive fathers—and more than a few mothers too—who argue that the way to handle a bully is to fight back. Punch the bully in the mouth! Jesus did no such thing. The same man who taught his followers to turn the other cheek (Mt 5:39), love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Mt 5:44), and do unto others as you would have them do unto you (Mt 7:12) is now the man under the microscope. Would he practice what he preached? He did more than that; he fulfilled Scripture. **“He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth, he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth”** (Isa 53:7).

Jesus let himself be brutalized. He *offered* his back. He *didn't object* to his oppressors, because he *was* the King of the Jews. He was the King of the Gentiles! He's King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev 19:16), his name is above every name and to him every knee will bow (Php 2:9,10). Why would our almighty King let himself be brutalized? Why doesn't he stand up and punch those bullies in the mouth? He did it for you. Jesus let himself be treated that way for you. Jesus knew it ahead of time; this was the cup of suffering Jesus asked God to take away! But God wouldn't take it away; he made Jesus drink every last drop. **“It was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer”** (Isa 53:10). Christ was brutalized for you as your perfect substitute. If Jesus hadn't endured this shame, if he had avoided the indignity, if he had retreated

from the cross or refused to drink even a drop of suffering, then there is no forgiveness of sins and God's wrath on you is still in play. And you better believe that God will do to you much worse than any Roman soldier could.

Listen to Matthew's words and hear how much Christ sacrificed for you. Look how thoroughly he was brutalized. That's how thoroughly you are forgiven! An ancient church father who lived in the days just after the Nicene Creed was penned, John Chrysostom, head of the church in Constantinople, explains why Christ's whole body had to suffer at the hands of brutality.

Not only one of the Lord's members, but his entire body had to suffer the most dreadful pains. His head was wounded by the crown of thorns, by the blows of the fists, and by the reed; his face endured spittle and smiting; his entire body was scourged, stripped, and arrayed in a robe of shape; his hands held the reed; later, his tongue had to taste vinegar and gall. Because sin dwells and is active in all our members, therefore Christ desired to suffer for our sins in all his members.

A bully tries to leverage power and control over you. When you're the victim of bullying, you feel alone and powerless, as though you have to obey the bully. Sin is a bully; it tries to coerce us into crimes against the commandments. The devil is a bully; Satan browbeats us into bad behavior. Our brother Jesus was bullied in our place and was brutalized, for all, and we belong to Christ. Now our spiritual bullies can't demand our milk money and have no say in our morality. **"Sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace"** (Ro 6:14). Since the forgiving love of Christ lives in our hearts, we happily submit to his gracious rule rather than to the empty threats of any evil bully. **"Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you"** (Jas 4:7).

Freedom from sin and Satan is reason enough to rejoice! But as we join Jesus in his gracious rule, we really begin to see what liberty looks like. **"Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God"** (1 Pe 4:1,2). Taking on Jesus' attitude enables us to turn the other cheek, pray for our enemies and persecutors, and do unto others as we'd have them do to us. Because Jesus made peace with us through the brutal suffering in his body, in him we are able to live peaceably with all people (Ro 12:18)

It's no wonder why the world is so unhappy. So many people are still living without Christ. They're being bullied by sin and Satan. They feel alone and powerless as the bullies dictate their lives. How much better is it to have God as your Father? He raises happy kids! Our brother, Jesus, suffered under the soldiers' hands of brutality, and as a result we will never have to suffer God's wrath. And, as happy kids in God's family, we delight to bring our brother's peace to people who are still being bullied. Amen.