

Your Face In The Crowd Matthew 27:27-56

Inspired by and expanded from a sermon by Ryan Johnson

The Cross.

*"It rests on the time line of history like a compelling diamond.
It's tragedy summons all sufferers.
It's Absurdity attracts all critics.
It's hope lures all searchers.*



My what a piece of wood! History has idolized it. And despised it, gold plated it and burned it, worn it and trashed it.

*History has done everything to it but ignore it.
That's the one option that the cross does not offer.
No one can ignore it! You can't ignore the place where hung the greatest claim in history. A crucified carpenter claiming that he is God on earth!*

The cross.

if the account is true, it is history's hinge. Period.

If not, it's history's hoax." (Max Lucado, Six Hours One Friday)

On that 1st Easter morning, which we will again commemorate next week, the Kingdom of death was repossessed and God's grace took up the payments. But even Easter has to start with the cross, So that is where we must go today.

First, let me set the stage. How many of you enjoy having your picture taken? While some people still run from the camera's flash, these days, most people are quick to pull out their phone and snap a selfie; but sometimes they capture even more faces than they intended.

For you older folk let me explain. A "selfie" is when you hold your cell phone – looking back at you – from an arm's length away to take a picture of yourself in whatever location and with whoever you wish to be pictured with. But since you can't see what your cell phone sees, you sometimes also capture faces of people who accidentally or intentionally come up behind you to be included in your photo (if intentional, this is called "photobombing").

On our last plane flight, Betty and I were sitting behind a young mother and her teen daughter who began taking selfies to pass the time. Being a head taller than the seats and able to see their selfie results through the crack between the seats, I realized that I

was prominently featured in each one of their shots, so next I tried ducking down in my seat only to see the resulting photo of this mysterious eye now peering at them from between the seats. I hope they erased those photos; I really didn't want to be in their pictures.

Which brings us to today's message. Because as we look at the text, we see that Matthew took pictures of people who were near the cross on that fateful day when Jesus died. While I am sure that there were many who would not want to be caught in these pictures, no one escaped Matthew's camera; the times and clothing may be different, but if we look closely, we will find your face & mine among those crowded near the cross.

The first picture from Matthew 27:32 is mostly of Jesus and that one person whom *"they forced to carry the cross."*



Simon was a common Jewish name. No one special, just someone in the wrong place at the wrong time. Maybe he was religious. Maybe he knew that God would someday send a messiah, a savior... But for right now, he doesn't want to be in this picture. Simon was forced near the cross. But he is not the only one in this picture.

Some of you here today may feel just like Simon: forced to be near the cross. Look for your face in this picture. Are you Simon or are you back there among the bewildered crowd?

As a child going to church, you might say that I became a drug addict. Because sometimes my parents drugged me all the way there. Some of you may also feel "drugged" to church, forced to be near the cross because of family: a husband that feels obligated, a mother who only comes for her children. A child who comes because once again the parents said so. Others come out of tradition or because it polishes their community reputation. And perhaps even some preachers - who have to come to get paid (not everyone standing in a pulpit these days necessarily wants to be near the cross).

But everyone of us does have one common link with this photo and that is at one time or another, for various reasons, we were forced near the cross.

Out of everyone in these photos. Simon got the closest to Jesus and the cross. But at least in this picture, he apparently wasn't changed by it. That horizontal beam of God's love was on his very back, but not in his heart. We are not told of his conversion.

Neither does Matthew record that he ran home and told his wife that he carried a cross for God.

So this is what we need to learn from this picture. You can be Close to the Cross, yet still far from Christ. Your attendance in church does not make you a Christian, only your personal faith lived in a relationship with Jesus Christ can make you a Christian.

But Simon is not the only religious phony in these photos. All you see here in this second photo are the gambling Soldiers but just outside this frame are also the curious crowd, the religious leaders, two thieves and possibly even YOU! These are the people that, knowingly (or unknowingly) make a mockery of the cross.



These soldiers remind me of us: the religious. And I mean all of us – even me. Every believer in this room and in all the other churches. The stuffy. The loose. The strict. The simple. The upper church. Lower church. Robes, Collars. Ties and suits or tennis Shirts. Sometimes, we too are like the soldiers playing games at the foot of the cross. We compete for members. We scramble for status. We squabble over this or that social issue – but we don't look up to see what Jesus might want.

So close to the timber of the cross but our backs turned to the blood. We huddle around the world's events while we gripe, gossip, and bicker over opinions. So close to the cross but so far from what Christ died to achieve.

It is interesting that Matthew's account charges both thieves on the crosses next to him with mocking Jesus. We usually think of one the thieves as penitent, and Luke's account does have him asking a blessing of Jesus (23:43), but Matthew's photo records them both as unrepentant. They were so close to Jesus' that they can look him in the eye, but in this picture, at least, they remain unchanged.

From earlier in Matthew's gospel we see not only the soldiers but also the priests hitting and spitting on Jesus. Also the religious leaders – those who should have best known him from their studies – are instead hurling insults and quoting his own Biblically prophetic words back at him. Deep inside, they thought the cross was foolishness. Only a fool would remain there if there was any way he could get off. They just could not comprehend the power of God's love and forgiveness.

Of such people, Paul wrote, "*The cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God.*" (1 Corinthians 1:18). And if you find yourself in this photograph today let me remind you that Paul also said that the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:25).

About such foolish non-belief, I found a story I couldn't believe at first. Supposedly in a cemetery next to the highway outside of Prairies Grove Arkansas there are two prominent head stones of a husband and wife with the last name of Strickland. She was in born in 1948. He was born in 1927. Underneath both their names, in big letters, carved into each stone is the declaration: **ATHEIST**

Underneath atheist, for Mrs. Strickland, is added this statement:

"I have cared for and loved many animals"

woopy doo ... If that's all you can say.....

And underneath Mr. Strickland'. It says

"I am a very busy man and I don't have time for this."

As I said, I had a hard time believing this story so I went looking for the truth. If it was out there somewhere, the internet would know. Surprise! Guess who I found?



Wayne Everett Strickland, the man who "didn't have time for this," died in 2005. Having not found her in the cemetery registry, I suppose Mrs. Strickland hasn't died yet. She still has time to change her mind about that declaration on her head stone.

The Psalmist wrote, *The Fool has a said in his heart that there is no God!* (14 and 53)

The scary thing about these first three photos is that all of us have probably been in the picture at some time in our lives! And maybe more people than will admit it, should have "atheist" carved on their headstone.



In all these photos you will see today, there are really only two categories of people. **those who touched the cross by chance and those touched it by choice.**

In the first photos, they were only there by chance; no one was really changed by the cross. But these next photos you can only get into by choice, as you join with those who are beginning to understand what it means to find **FORGIVENESS IN THE CROSS.**

This next snapshot is found in verse 54. *Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"* (Matthew 27:54)



Honestly, in this one and the next few are the only pictures you want to be found "in" when the Risen Jesus Christ returns to the earth.

And isn't it interesting that the faces found in these next pictures are the least likely candidates for being God's people. These faces will not be found on America's most successful people. They will not be "persons of the year" for Time magazine. The faces Matthew shows are of soldiers who are only carrying out orders but still killing an innocent man.

What did they see. They saw a beaten, slashed, nail-suspended preacher. His face crimson with blood. His bones peeking through the torn flesh, his body heaving for air. What changed their minds? Certainly the choreographed darkness and earthquakes helped them believe; Jesus speaks and the ground quakes.

But maybe also they heard him forgiving them as they drove spikes through his flesh.

Then seeing him in anguish on the cross yet still caring for his mother, placing her in the care of John, his only disciple who was brave enough to come close. **Love and forgiveness bound together with power and the willingness to sacrifice; even in their brief time with him, they knew deity when they saw it.** Now they are thinking that they had just killed God, what must they do to be saved?

"Truly this man was God's Son!"



And what about that second thief? Matthew's picture didn't offer him much hope. Certainly we would agree that a criminal should be the least likely candidate for God's offer of salvation. But Luke's account shows a different picture of him, A ex-con getting what he deserved for his crimes, but asking God if not for life, at least for forgiveness: *remember me when you come into your kingdom.* Jesus granted both his request and his most urgent desire. He deserved Hell but he gets Heaven!

Why are we surprised at this picture?

Because in our world value is measured by appearance and performance. But in God's photo album. A person is worth something just because he is a person; he is loved.

Maybe this criminal had earlier heard the Messiah speak; had seen him loving and touching the lowliest. Maybe he had been one of the punks, pickpockets & prostitutes, that Jesus was accused of spending too much time with. He didn't believe then, but now he also sees what the centurion is seeing, *"Surely this was the Son of God?"*

"Any chance you could put a good word in for me?" Asked the criminal

"Consider it done" Jesus replied.

Why are we uncomfortable with such pictures.

A pagan ex-con and a pagan centurion saved!

So many "good people" excluded but criminals and murderers given a free pass.

I think it is because one of the hardest things for us to admit is that – just like that convict and those soldiers we too should be condemned; we also need to be forgiven.

Apparently, one of the hardest things for us to do is accept salvation by grace alone.

There's is something in us that reacts to God's free gift. We have some weird compulsion to create laws, and regulations that will make us worthy of our gift?

It is only self deception that keeps us out of these photos of the centurion and the thief when our honesty should include us here. Accepting grace only comes when we realize we are helpless to save ourselves.

But how can someone else save us?

How this happens is known as the doctrines of **substitution** and **imputation**.

The Bible teaches *that the wages we earn for our sin is death* (Romans 6:23). The centurion, the thief, and we ALL deserve to die. Jesus, who lived a perfect life need not have died. But he dies anyway – taking theirs, yours, and my place on that cross. That is the doctrine of **substitution**.

All of your sins and all my sins and all the sins of everyone that ever lived or will ever live was charged against Jesus account. We ran up the bill, but Jesus paid it for us. That is the doctrine of **imputation**.

On the cross God treated Jesus as if he lived your life.

So that he could treat you as if you had lived his.

Your sins are charged against JESU' account

And his perfect life is credited to yours.

Max Lucado writes,

Like a master painter God reserved his masterpiece until the end.

All the earlier acts of love have been leading to this one.

God unveils the canvas and the ultimate act of creative compassion is revealed.

God on a cross.
The Creator dying to save His creation.

What were the myriad of faces and memories that went through his mind on the cross.
All I know is that he died to make room for you and me in the final family portrait.
(Lucado "No Wonder They Call Him a Savior")



But while we are thinking of those soldiers and sinners who finally found their way to the cross, let's take another look at an earlier picture from a different angle. Remember, Matthew's recounts without further comment that a man named Simon of Cyrene was forced to carry Jesus' cross up Golgotha Hill. But Mark's gospel records him as being *the father of Alexander and Rufus*; two people apparently well known to Christians in Rome (15:21). The fact that Simon's name appears in two Gospels along with his son's names, gives a strong impression that he and his family indeed found their way to the cross of Christ either before or because of the cross he carried. Simon wanted his name included with Jesus and the cross, otherwise he would have remained only an anonymous stranger allowed to quietly slip back into the crowd.

Here then is the irony in all these photos of those near the cross; that those who should have embraced Jesus message – the priests, rabbis, and Pharisees – because of their various prides all missed it. But those who only knew what they saw and what they desperately needed, the soldiers, the thief, and the man who carried his cross, they got it. At the cross they finally embraced the Son of God.

Now let's look at Matthew's last photo: the friends and family of Jesus (in verses **55-56**). These are the ones who came to the cross already changed by the cross, and now they remain at the cross to comfort one another and to be given a mission.



All the Marys were there: Jesus' mother, Mary Clopas (the mother of James and Joseph), and the lady from Magdala. There also was Mary's sister Salome and her one of her sons, John (the "beloved disciple"). There at the cross they first wept, they were then comforted by Jesus, then they left that place – to carry the message of his cross into all the world.

I hope that eventually we all will make it into this final photo. Because if you just there with the soldiers and the thief, you might know that you are a forgiven SINNER, but you'll never know that you are now also a commissioned SAINT. One who has been set apart – by God – to do his work.

What picture do you find yourself today?

Are you still among those who were forced near the cross, Or are you with those foolish people sitting in the shadow of the cross while completely missing its significance. If you are, then you need to know God also has a camera in hand. And He wants to take picture of you finding forgiveness through the cross. And then He wants to take a picture of you leaving this place with Jesus.



For God so loved the world that he gave us his only Son, so that everyone – which includes you – if you believe in him you may not perish but may have eternal life. God did not send His Son into your world to condemn you, but in order that you be saved through him. (John 3:16-17 paraphrased).

So if you are still only standing near the cross, why don't you find your standing in the cross; take a good look at this man who gave his life to save yours and join with the thief in asking "Jesus, please remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Let's pray about this.