

**CHARACTERS WITH CHARACTER:
JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA
Luke 23:50-56**

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, August 15, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments.

On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

I.

As most of you know, the series of sermons this summer has focused on Biblical “characters with character” – in this instance all of whom give evidence of *good character*. Working on this series and the class I taught in June out of which it arose, I have drawn several conclusions about human character:

- Under normal circumstances, character floats along the surface of our lives, like the sound of our voice or the color of our eyes. It is a gentle and integral part of who we are without drawing attention to itself. It leads us to act with consistency and compassion. People with good character are predictable. They neither grab nor make headlines. They *live* their lives rather than *perform* them.
- But sometimes situations arise – personal or public – which demand something more than quiet expression of character.
 - Sometimes character must steel itself with *courage* and lead us to do something outside our tendency to live and let live, outside our natural propensity for privacy, outside our intuitive sense that we have little to offer a situation to alter its course or even make a difference to its outcome.
 - Sometimes character beckons us to act on something *we* see that *others* do *not* see.
 - Sometimes when we seek to inject good character into a situation, it is received by those to whom we express it not so much as a breath of fresh air but more like a pesky gnat around the eyebrows, or worse, a tornado against which they head for the storm shelter, or an invading army against which they call for reinforcements.

In such situations, we must pair our character with *courage* and *humility* in order for character to receive any kind of hearing at all.

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When we consider the last few hours of Jesus’ life, three people involved in his death stand out in our memories.

One is the penitent *thief on the cross*.¹ As you will recall, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus is crucified alongside two thieves. As death approaches for all three, one thief angrily demands that Jesus save himself and them. But the other one upbraids this angry thief:

Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?

And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds,

but this man has done nothing wrong.

In his final hours, this thief *acknowledges* who Jesus is, *proclaims* Jesus' innocence, *confesses* his own sinfulness, and *asks* Jesus for forgiveness. The final words he speaks before crucifixion does its work are

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

And the final words he who has been condemned *on earth* hears are

Today you will see me in Paradise.

Can you imagine any more beautiful words than these as the last words you hear?

For the penitent thief, character involves a *change of heart and mind*. *Character equals conversion*.

**

For the *second person* we remember, character also involves a change of heart and mind.

In Hemingway's short story "Today is Friday," three Roman soldiers retire to a bar around 11:00 p.m. after standing guard over the crucifixion of Christ for the better part of the day. Crucifixion duty is not new to them; it appears to one of their regular beats.

But on this night, one of the soldiers feels sick to his stomach, and even as the other two keep ploughing him with liquor, the soldier says quietly, "He looked pretty good to me in there today." Six times in the two-and-a-half pages of this story the soldier recites this mantra as if he were describing a matador or a prizefighter – two of Hemingway's stock heroes – "He looked pretty good to me in there today." Even as the alcohol leads him to less clarity of mind and voice, the soldier knows that somehow, the man they have executed that day was different. "He looked pretty good in there today."

Luke and Mark describe the soldier's words more theologically than Hemingway:

- "Certainly this man was righteous," Luke recounts the centurion saying upon Jesus' death.
- "Truly this man was God's Son" are the words Mark attributes to the soldier.²

Whatever words he actually said, like the thief on the cross, the *Roman Centurion* experienced a *change of heart and mind* when he beheld the cross of Christ. *Character as conversion*.

¹ Luke 23:32-43.

² *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway: The Vinca Vigia Edition* (New York: Scribner, 1987). The story was originally published in 1926.

II.

But the third person who plays a role in the last hours of Jesus' life shows a *different kind of character*: not the character that comes when *we* change, but the character required when the *situation around us changes*.

- At some point in nearly everyone's life – private or public – something out of the ordinary develops where we are called upon to use our judgement, knowledge and wisdom to act; and once we accept that we need to act, we *steel our courage* to carry our decision out.
- Whether our action bears fruit or not, we face whatever opposition comes our way, whatever relationships are lost or fractured, whatever emotional, vocational, physical harm or even death we might face.
- This is character that long exists beneath the surface, sometimes dormant, sometimes simply never called up for use, character we may not even have known we had but that when tested in the fire of circumstances rises up, acts, and passes the moral test.
- This is character that sees the truth of a situation, acknowledges it, speaks up to *change* or *defend* it, and then accepts whatever consequences follow.

This is the character not so much of *conversion* as of *courage*.

**

The person who most shows this kind of character surrounding the end of Christ's life is *Joseph of Arimathea*, who appears in all four Gospels.³

Listen to the words that between them Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John use to describe Joseph:

- *Rich*⁴
- *A disciple* of Jesus⁵
- *Waiting expectantly* for the kingdom of God⁶
- *Good and righteous* [terms that describe faithful Jews]⁷
- *A member of the council* [the local religious body that asked the Roman authorities to put Jesus to death]⁸
- *Respected* within the council⁹
- *Not in agreement with* the council's decision to seek Jesus' execution from the Roman authorities.¹⁰

After the decision to which Joseph objected was carried out and Jesus was crucified, Joseph uses his influence in the community to go to Pilate – the local political appointee who had authorized Jesus' crucifixion – and ask for *permission to remove the body* from the cross for burial.¹¹

³ Matthew 27:57-61, Mark 15:42-47, Luke 23:50-56, John 19:38-42.

⁴ Matthew 27:57.

⁵ Matthew 27:57, John 19:38.

⁶ Mark 15:43, Luke 23:51.

⁷ Luke 23:50.

⁸ Mark 15:43, Luke 23:50.

⁹ Mark 15:43.

¹⁰ Luke 23:51.

¹¹ All four gospels depict this.

When Pilate grants Joseph permission, Joseph:

- Personally *removes* the body from the cross¹²
- Personally *wraps* it in a shroud¹³
- Personally *places it in a tomb*,¹⁴ which earlier he has *personally* hewn from rock¹⁵
- Personally *rolls a stone* in front of the opening of the tomb.¹⁶

Then, like so many other characters we know in life and literature, Joseph takes his leave from the stage, fading away for women to enter on Easter morning, fading into history only to re-emerge memorialized by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in scripture.

III.

What can we surmise from their depictions of Joseph as being the *sources* of his courage?

Some of his sources are what we would call “*otherworldly*”:

- His faith in God
- His respect for and obedience to *Jewish Law* – which is what “good and righteous”¹⁷ mean
- His *anticipation* of the Kingdom of God:¹⁸ his expecting that in the ultimacy of time, God would set things right, bring about God’s unique combination of justice and mercy, bring about redemption; and Joseph’s *living toward* that expected reality in ways as if it had already arrived.

Other sources of Joseph’s courage are more “*this worldly*”:

- His history of being *respected* by others in the community and council
- His *membership* in the council
- His *financial* resources.

Joseph of Arimathea was a leading citizen of the Jewish community. His character and position in the community are both depicted as positive, and both place him high on the ladder of desirable worldly traits or circumstances to have. Respected. Good and righteous. Financially secure. What’s not to like?

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C-Span did not provide gavel-to-gavel coverage of the council meeting at which the vote was taken to sentence Jesus to crucifixion. Nor do we have minutes of the meeting or access to diaries of council members discovered in attics centuries later that shed light on the inner workings of the council and the inner feelings of the diarists. But we know that of the four gospel writers, Luke notes: *Joseph of Arimathea had not agreed to their plan and action.*

¹² All four gospels depict this.

¹³ All four gospels depict this.

¹⁴ All four gospels depict this.

¹⁵ Only Matthew 27:60 depicts that Joseph actually hewed the tomb out of the rock himself.

¹⁶ Matthew 27:60 and Mark 15:46 have this detail, which the other two omit.

¹⁷ Luke 23:50.

¹⁸ Luke 23:51, Mark 15:42.

We can surmise, from Luke's statement, that whatever happened in the meeting –

- Joseph *spoke* up
- Joseph tried to persuade others *not to convict* this itinerant rabbi who only four days earlier had ridden into town with cheers of welcome
- When he couldn't persuade others to agree with him, Joseph *voted no*
- If councils then worked like that often do now, Joseph was likely given the opportunity to change his vote and make the action unanimous so the decision might draw more community support or at least less opposition.
- But even if given the chance to change his vote, Joseph held with his "no."
- He had refused to be silent or to be silenced.

**

Yesterday I ran across an obituary of a historian with whom I was not familiar named Leon Litwack, who died earlier this month at age 91. He taught for many years at Berkeley. In 2001, in an interview, he said:

...we need to be wary of those who in the name of protecting our freedoms would diminish them. History teaches...that it is not the rebels, the iconoclasts, the curious, the dissidents who endanger a...society but rather the accepting, the unthinking, the unquestioning, the docile, the obedient, the silent, and the indifferent.¹⁹

Joseph of Arimathea refused to be silent. He reached inside, drew on his courage, and vote against the tide of popular opinion.

IV.

Following his vote, Joseph disappears into history.

- Perhaps he left town, needed a fresh start somewhere else.
- Perhaps he knew he, his kids, his family, would no longer be welcome, would always be whispered about, in the stores and shops, in the schools and on the athletic fields.
- Perhaps he was warned he needed to leave town for his own safety.

But like the thief on the cross and the Roman soldier, thanks to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, *Joseph doesn't disappear from memory or example*. Like the man whose body he removed and provided a decent burial,

"[Joseph] was pretty good in there..."

"He was pretty good in [that council meeting]..."

"He was pretty good..."

Character as courage. Amen.

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¹⁹ Matt Schudel, "Leon Litwack, Pulitzer Prize-winning scholar of America's racial divide, dies at 91," in *The Washington Post* 8/13/21.