

THE TROUBLE WITH GRASPING FOR GREATNESS

*Palm Sunday · March 29, 2026
St. John Chrysostom Anglican Church · Mission, Texas*

Christ sanctified suffering so we can become by grace what God is by nature – even at our lowest.

The irony of Judas Iscariot's role in the crucifixion of Christ is that, in the end, he is the most theologically precise. Realizing what he has done, he says, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood."

That's not a confused man. That's not a man in denial. He has the diagnosis exactly right. Judas knows what he did. He knows who he betrayed and why he did it. Innocent blood. Financial gain. The King James language even says he "repented himself" by bringing the silver back to the temple.

But he still went out and hanged himself.

Judas suffered because he had truth in his hands, but he couldn't receive what it was offering him. That's the gap in which Judas lived. And some of us know something of that gap. We have stood there knowing something was true yet finding ourselves unable to fully surrender to it.

When life doesn't go the way we plan, we're prone to assert ourselves in situations. We stand on our rights and we protect our own interests. Self-assertion, in the end, is not always aggressive. Sometimes it's just a closed hand. A turned-away face. A version of ourselves that rejects God's grace, even when some part of us knows that the only way forward is through the pain and suffering – not around it.

There's a story that has been on national news and is now circulating on social media in the guise of an uplifting faith story. Early in her marriage, her husband suffered a

catastrophic brain injury. When he came out of the coma, the man she had married was, for all practical purposes, gone. His memory had been reduced to seconds. He required constant care. She genuinely loved him. She continued to care for him. She even became his legal guardian. She still visits him regularly. But she divorced him and remarried another man. She has integrated her now former husband into her new family's life. She quotes her marriage vows. She says she took them seriously. I don't doubt that she loves him in her own way. The care she provides to him is real and costly.

Nonetheless, the point of the divorce for her was remarriage. And what that remarriage represents — however understandably, however kindly we hold it — is a rewriting of the story. A rewriting of the vows halfway through the race. Vows she said she would live inside, in sickness and in health, until death did them part. That was the story intended. Presumably, however, the pain became too much, and she sought a sedative through a second marriage.

What bothers me the most about this story is that the woman says she sought counsel from church leaders and the scriptures. And I believe that 100%. The advice she received, however, shows the great deficit that exists in the Christian West of any meaningful theology of suffering. The story is now billed as one of unconditional love. But by definition, it is a story of *conditional* love. The advice she received led her to put strings on the fidelity portion of her vows.

What this woman could not have know — what none of us can know when we are in the middle of our worst suffering — is what Christ might have done with that first marriage. What might the sanctification of those vows, honored in that darkness, have produced? Instead, like many of us, she looked at the cost of suffering and made a calculation. The calculation is understandable. It is human. It is what all of us do when the suffering goes on long enough without a clear resolution.

But that is not what Christ did for us.

Matthew makes a point of telling us that Jesus was offered a sedative, but when he realized it was wine mixed with gall — something to dull the pain — he refused it. Dying for us by crucifixion wasn't enough. He wanted the whole thing — unmedicated, unreduced.

Lancelot Andrewes described the cross as a “death long in dying.” Why? He wasn’t merely sanctifying human souls at once. He was sanctifying human suffering itself – making it something through which God makes us by grace what He is by nature – even at our lowest.

In short, Christ intended to enter the darkest night of your soul and transform it into a means of grace for you.

This is the opposite of grasping at greatness. He did not assert His divinity. He did not find a way to honor the spirit of his commitment to His creation while escaping its weight. He chose not to come down from the cross – even when taunted into doing so.

Paul, writing to the Philippians, makes a point of noting that the descent of Christ did not stop at death. He writes: “He humbled himself and became obedient unto death” – and then adds, separately, almost as if he wants to make sure we don't miss it, “even the death of the cross.” That extra clause is doing something. The descent didn't stop at dying. It stopped at that particular death – the most shameful, the most exposed, the most legally cursed death the ancient world had devised – something that Romans wouldn’t even discuss in polite company.

C.S. Lewis put it this way – God could not redeem human pain by touching it lightly. The descent had to go all the way down to where the pain actually lives. You cannot sanctify what you will not fully enter.

So, Christ went all the way to the bottom of it.

If you have stood before authority uncertain of what would come of it... if you have lost something because of the schemes of others... if you have seen the guilty go unpunished or been the innocent afflicted... the silence of Jesus before Pilate – when all the rest of us would have made an answer for ourselves – that ought to be personal to you. So, too, the refused sedative. Jesus didn’t stand at a theoretical distance from human suffering. He went inside it, all the way.

Jesus didn’t just take on your sin... he took on your pain. And when Jesus died, He did so at a time of his own choosing. The word Matthew uses for giving up His spirit is the same

word that would be used to describe a master dismissing his servant. He dismissed His spirit. Still in total control – just choosing not to come down from the cross all the way to the end.

Every person who has ever died has had death happen to them. Death will happen to you. But death didn't happen to Jesus. He sent His spirit away on His own authority – sovereign to the last breath.

Because Jesus did this, we may not choose a particular form of suffering, but the sovereign Christ can work through it. Think of Simon of Cyrene. He did not volunteer to carry the cross of Christ. He was just passing by – probably on his way into the city for Passover – and the soldiers compelled him. They put the cross on his shoulders. He didn't sign up for this. It arrived uninvited. They said, “do it.” So he did. And what we know from the rest of the New Testament is that his sons, Alexander and Rufus, became known members of the early church. The compelled cross-bearer, the man who did not choose his suffering – his suffering became the door through which his whole family walked into the kingdom of God.

Here's a modern typology to point us to the importance of the cross.

When things go wrong in a nuclear reactor, there is an emergency shut down procedure called the SCRAM. (And I was so sure of my abilities as a young nuclear reactor operator in the Navy that when we had the chance to have our belt buckles engraved for our uniforms, I chose to have mine say “SCRAM for God and country.”)

A nuclear reactor generates power through a chain reaction. Neutrons strike atoms, release energy, release more neutrons, which strike more atoms. Under controlled conditions, it's productive and manageable. A miracle of physics, even. But a runaway chain reaction – unchecked, unabsorbed – becomes catastrophic. Think: meltdown. The neutrons multiply. The heat builds. The system that was designed to produce power begins to consume itself.

Enter control rods. When inserted quickly enough, these rods bring a runaway reaction to a halt by absorbing all the neutrons flying around. Those neutrons would otherwise perpetuate the cascade, but the rods eat them up.

The irony I would have you consider is that the material in the control rods is itself a kind of poison. But the thing to which they are toxic is the very reaction into which the rods are inserted. It is poison only to something far worse.

Now think about the human condition. Violence begets violence. Unforgiveness begets unforgiveness. Self-assertion begets more self-assertion. The runaway reaction has been building since Eden — each betrayal producing another, each wound producing another wound, each closed hand producing more closed hands. The cycle has no exit from inside itself. We cannot absorb our own runaway reaction. We have tried. It does not work.

Christ on the cross — that long death dying — is the control rod inserted into the core of the human condition. Christ does not fight the chaos from outside. He enters it. He absorbs it — the sin, the violence, the accumulated poison of fallen humanity.

And here is where the irony lands: *suffering looks like poison*. It *feels* like poison. But in the light of the cross, Christ has made suffering to be something that is toxic to those parts of us that are too comfortable... those parts of us that are too self-preserving. The cross is poison to our lowest selves... so that we might be raised into our highest. So that we might become, through the very mechanism that looks from the outside like defeat and destruction, partakers of the nature that God always intended for us.

What looked like catastrophic failure from the outside — a man executed as a criminal, abandoned by his disciples, mocked by the crowd — is, from the inside, the most controlled and deliberate act in the history of creation.

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Let me correct any misunderstanding: the suffering that comes into your life — the runaway reaction that lands on you — was not engineered by God. Fallen human beings

and fallen nature cause that pain, not Him. He did not design your worst suffering. But He did enter it. He inserted Himself into the core of it. And His entering into it transformed it to be something God can use to make you by grace what He is by nature – even at your lowest.

The woman who divorced her husband, however understandably – she missed out on something. She was never obliged to suffer merely for the sake of suffering. But inside that suffering – inside the vows honored in the darkness – Christ was offering to be the control rod. To absorb what was running away. To produce some kind of fruit from that suffering that could not have come by any other means.

Paul, writing elsewhere to the Corinthians, puts it like this:

For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might become rich.

That is the exchange. He went down so that we could come up. He became what we are so that we might become what He is. The descent is not an end in itself. It is the mechanism of transfer. And the poverty He entered is still making people rich. This exchange is open to us today at the Lord's Table.

The Gospel reading today gives us two witnesses to this exchange. The first is Barabbas. His name in Aramaic is bar-abba – son of the father. Not *the* Son of the Father, but *a* son of a father. A man who was in a prison cell awaiting execution for his role in an insurrection. He had tried to liberate Israel by the method of force and self-assertion – the very method that cannot work, that only produces more of the same runaway reaction. He had done what the crowd does, what Judas does, what all of us do when we reach the end of ourselves and grab for the nearest weapon.

And then the door opened. Not because he earned it. Not because he repented of it, at least not that we know of. Not because he asked for it. The door simply opened because someone else took his place. He walked out of the cell into a world that had been rearranged on his behalf while he was waiting to die. Bar-abba – son of the father – walked free because the true Son of the Father took what he deserved.

And then there is the centurion. He has seen a great deal of death. That is his profession. He is not naive, not sentimental, not easily moved. He has stood at executions before — many of them. He is a man who has been made hard by what he has witnessed. And this one broke through everything. He had no theology. He had no Athanasius. What he had was the vocabulary his world had given him — he had read, or at least heard, about the cosmic signs that accompanied the deaths of Caesar and Augustus. The historians Suetonius and Virgil both record darkness and portents at the death of Rome's great men. The creation bearing witness to the passing of one of the divine.

At the death of Jesus, there were three hours of supernatural darkness. The earth shaking, rocks splitting, the curtain of the temple torn from top to bottom, the tombs of the saints opened — the centurion looked at this and said what the trained religious authorities, what Pilate, what the whole apparatus of the system could not bring itself to say:

Truly this was the Son of God.

The centurion did not need a seminary degree. He just needed to be present and to see. And what he saw was enough.

There is some hope here for those of us with disquieted minds... for those of us who love intensely, who think hard, whose minds are not easily quieted — whose imaginations, if we are honest, consume us in ways that are not always helpful. Some of us love intensely but are loving the wrong things. Some of us have full imaginations, but we imagine the wrong things — and it consumes us. The danger of both is not in loving or imagining too much, but loving without Christ as the fixed center. When the *suffering servant* that is Jesus Christ becomes the object of our love — when we take all the mental and spiritual energy we have been pouring into lesser things and fix it on studying who He is and what He came for — we do not find ourselves diminished. We find ourselves illuminated. Every other love gets lighter. Every other burden gets clearer.

Before Ignatius of Loyola became the founder of the Jesuits, before the Spiritual Exercises, before any of it — he was a soldier. Ambitious, intense, consumed by fantasy and military glory. A cannonball shattered his leg at the siege of Pamplona. Bedridden for months, he asked for the romances he loved — they were not available. What was available was a life of Christ and a book about the saints. He read them with the same intensity he had brought to everything else in his life.

And he noticed something. When he imagined military glory and fame, the pleasure was real — but it faded quickly and left him empty. Yet, when he imagined following Christ into poverty and service, the pleasure deepened and stayed. He was not being asked to love less. He was being shown where his love actually belonged.

He did not stop being Ignatius — intense, strategic, driven. If anything, he became more fully Ignatius, with the same capacities now aimed at the right object. Everything he had always been became what it was always meant to be.

So, fix your eyes on Jesus. The author and perfecter of our faith. Who for the joy set before Him endured the cross. You are His joy. And He is large enough to bear the weight of your full attention without collapsing under it.

Today is Palm Sunday, and Hosanna is not an acclamation. It is a plea. It means “save us now.” The crowd was crying out for rescue. And as He rode into Jerusalem, may He now ride into your heart. He came from the Father. He went to the Father. And on the journey between — through the silence before Pilate, through the refused sedative... through the darkness and the earthquake and the sovereign death — He won a bride for Himself... a provision that ensures you will never be utterly alone.

At the Table of the Lord, we are not called to perform an emptying of our own. We are not capable of it. We don't take communion... we receive communion. We receive out of Christ's own emptying of Himself — the blood and water from his side. And we do so that we might carry forward the divine nature He is giving to us one day at a time.

Judas? He came to the first Table and left it. He had the diagnosis exactly right and could not open his hands to receive what the diagnosis required. At his lowest, he walked out into the night.

Barabbas? He never came to any table. He just found the door open. He walked out free because someone else took his place. He did not understand it. He did not deserve it. But at his lowest, he received it.

The centurion? Never came to a table either – at least that we know for certain. He stood at an otherwise familiar cross, and what he witnessed broke through every category he had brought to that hill and produced a confession he had not planned to make.

The Lord's Table is all three moments at once. The door Barabbas walked through is open. The cross the centurion witnessed is present. The diagnosis Judas could not surrender – you can surrender it here.

The poverty He assumed at the Incarnation, at Bethlehem, at Golgotha – His poverty becomes your richness at this Table. Every time. He went all the way down so that you could receive all the way up.

May you leave the Table this morning more able to say – more fervently than when you came in – “Surely, this is the Christ.”

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