

The People Around Us

On Sunday, we continued our intensive study of Jesus' experience on the cross by focusing on how he responded to the difficult people around him, seeking to learn from his example.

1. Warm up question. Who's the craziest person you've ever encountered at work?
2. Once again, let's read Matthew 27:31-44. On Sunday we focused on the parts of this passage describing the people around Jesus on the cross. The text tells us that the two bandits crucified on either side of Jesus mercilessly taunted him, as well as many of those who came to witness his execution. The verbal abuse was over the top. They said things like: "He saved others; he cannot save himself," "He trusted in God, let's see if God delivers him," and "If you're the Son of God, come down from there."
 - a. As Jesus heard all this, how do you think he felt? How do you think he was tempted to respond?
 - b. In the movie "Joy Luck Club," Waverly tells how her mother's cruel words affected her. "What she said to me was like a curse. This power I had, this belief in what I'd been given, I could actually feel it draining away. I could feel myself becoming so ordinary. And all the secrets that I once saw I couldn't see any more. All I could see were my mistakes and my weaknesses, and the best part of me disappeared." In "The Color Purple," in one last desperate attempt to keep Celie under his thumb, Mister says, "Who you think you is . . . ? Look at you. You're black, you're poor, you're ugly, you're a woman, you're nothing at all." When in your life have you encountered this kind of devilish attack on your spirit? How did it affect you? How did you respond?
3. When Jesus was attacked by the people around him on the cross, "Like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth." Isaiah 53:7. From this we learned the first of two key lessons for dealing with difficult people: **Refused to engage them. Protect yourself by refusing to allow yourself to be emotionally sucked into the drama. Control your own narrative instead of giving that power to the difficult people around you.**
 - a. If you've ever played sports, or any other competitive activity, what happens when you allow your opponent to get into your head with trash talk or other distractive behavior? When someone's being difficult, what's the harm in joining the fight?
 - b. It sounds good to say, "Tune out negative people; don't get sucked into the drama; don't give them the power to control your narrative." But it's not easy. What are some practical ways we can avoid being sucked into the drama? What are some practical ways we can control our own narrative?
 - c. Tell us about a difficult person in your life right now. Based on all we've discussed, how do you want to change or tweak how you're responding to them?

4. Jeff said, “Difficult people are a fact of life. They’re part of the obstacle course of life given to us to test, stretch, and grow our souls until we, like Celie in “The Color Purple,” learn to take charge of our own narrative. In that sense, difficult people are a gift – an opportunity for our eternal souls to grow and learn to be more like Jesus.” Do you buy that? Are difficult people a “gift”? Why or why not?
5. Jeff also said, “Truth is, you are someone else’s problem person. We’re all a little crazy. And that means you too. We’re all quirky, flawed, often-times ornery, difficult people. You are someone else’s cross to bear – and so am I. It can’t be avoided – it’s a fact of life.” How does it make you feel to think that you’re someone else’s difficult person? Do you know who that person is? Do you think there are things you can do to avoid being so difficult to them – or is it unavoidable?
6. Difficult people aren’t just put in our lives to test and grow us; they’re also there so that God, working through us, can offer them a chance at grace and redemption. Although we’re not told what Jesus was thinking when he responded to verbal abuse with silence, we have a pretty good idea. Jesus taught, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Matthew 5:44. In all he did on the cross, Jesus radiated grace toward his enemies. To see the impact of this, read Luke 23:39-43.
 - a. What do we learn from the fact that one of the criminals was completely unaffected by Jesus’ grace, while the second criminal was transformed by it?
 - b. Why is it so important to pray for the difficult people in our lives?
 - c. Think about a difficult person in your life. Besides prayer, what are some other practical ways you could show them grace?
7. From all this we drew a second lesson for dealing with difficult people: **Recognize that you’re there to help them. You may be the Jesus God is sending them to offer them grace and save them. So pray for them and treat them in the way God leads you in your prayers.**
 - a. Jeff closed Sunday’s sermon by telling how a house church located in the slums of Vancouver, British Columbia, used grace (Welfare Wednesday block parties) to persuade drug dealers to leave their block and to transform the life of one of the most hardened drug dealers. In your own life, have you ever observed a situation where grace made such a dramatic difference? Tell us about it.
 - b. Unrelated Closing Question: Several weeks ago, many of us covenanted to conduct a 6 month experiment in every-Sunday worship and/or to pray that God will lead us to someone to invite to church? If you made that covenant, how’s it going for you?