



**Glorified**  
**Scripture: Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33**  
**Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, Asheville, NC**  
**March 18, 2018**  
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

For the God of Jesus Christ glory is not pretty. “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified,” Jesus says, and here of course he’s talking about his death: Glory is an odd way to talk about the cross, public humiliation and execution.

Of course, there’s a million ways to make sense of this absurdity. A popular understanding that comes up every once in a while in and outside of churches is the idea of redemptive suffering: God purifies by pain, Jesus embraces his pain, so the idea goes that each victim also must embrace her pain, her oppression, for by suffering the soul is cleansed and rewarded in heaven. “Those who love their life lose it,” the Gospel says, “and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” Suffering as redemption; in the history of this idea, abuses of power, abuses of people often get a pass: embrace your pain, don’t struggle against it. That’s why some Christians, some of us, have done a whole 180 turn away from the cross: We don’t like to talk about it, because, well, talking about it has made things worse.

Or if not worse, it’s at least made things *odd*: My Baptist childhood memories are full of hymns singing about how great it is to take a bath in blood: “There is a fountain filled with blood / Drawn from Immanuel’s veins; / And sinners, plunged beneath that flood, / Lose all their guilty stains.”<sup>1</sup> At some point, church metaphors start to sound like a horror movie.

But there is Gospel in this glory when it is not abused by powerful people idealizing or pardoning suffering for their own gain, and when it is not suffering for suffering’s own sake.

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<sup>1</sup> William Cowper, “There is a Fountain.” [https://hymnary.org/text/there\\_is\\_a\\_fountain\\_filled\\_with\\_blood\\_dr](https://hymnary.org/text/there_is_a_fountain_filled_with_blood_dr). Accessed 3/18/18.

“Those who love their life lose it and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” Some things need to be lost:

It should have happened long before, but I’m sad to say it was only a few years ago: In the middle of a doctoral seminar, I was confronted by my own racism. The discussion among my fellow graduate students had fallen on the different ways Black and white progressive churches talk about racial diversity in their own congregations. We talked about how white progressives so often lament the lack of diversity in their pews, while Black churches tend to enjoy the refuge provided by the Black community itself. One of my African American colleagues made this well-placed joke about the congregation of his youth. He said, his home church worshipped freely, and wasn’t always saying to itself, “Man, I wish there were more white people around.” In turn, I asked him if socio-economic status or class played a role in his congregation’s approach to diversity. Implied in my admittedly stupid question was the assumption that white progressive congregations concerned about the lack of diversity in their churches were of a higher class than the Black congregation of my friend’s youth. Rightfully, a Black female scholar and colleague in the discussion pointed out this assumption with the incisive question, “What makes you think his congregation is low-class?” Shocked and ashamed at my own racist assumption, the way I had so casually collapsed Black skin with poverty, I found myself unable to respond; in fact, I was unable to speak in complete sentences for the remainder of that class.

And I’d like to say I learned my lesson then and there but I didn’t. I went on after the class, to argue with my Black colleagues that they had misunderstood what I had meant, when in fact, they did understand; they understood far better than I did, what had happened, what I had said and what I had meant. The great psychologist of race, Beverly Daniel Tatum, calls this the

“disintegration” stage of white identity development, when a white person inevitably is challenged about the once positive, innocent view of her or his self, and realizes that their actions and assumptions can be interpreted as racist.<sup>2</sup> “Those who love their life lose it.”

Glorified, Jesus says. “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” And by that, he means a cross.

A couple of weeks ago, our Head of Staff, Rev. Marcia Mount Shoop in her sermon read a line from a social theorist who said, “White men believed the American culture they shaped and institutions they ran were fair and sound and drove our triumphs. They saw little reason to change a society that had served them so well. But now they find their value system under assault from all directions.”<sup>3</sup> That line made me think of a book I read last year by Michael Kimmel titled *Angry White Men*. Kimmel goes further to say that such institutions are not only assaulted from outside, but they’re also crumbling from within, and those who feel themselves losing power and status are looking for someone to blame:

Angry White Men tells the story of the other side of the American Dream: the futility, the dashed hopes, the despair, and the rage. It tells the story of the rich and famous wannabes, the ones who thought they could invent themselves, reinvent themselves, be even more successful than their fathers. It tells the story of how white American men came to believe that power and authority were what they were entitled to, by birth, and how that birthright is now eroding...In a sense, of course, they’re right. Or, at least half right. Although they may choose the wrong targets for their anger – gay men, immigrants, blacks, and women are hardly the cause of their anguish – white men have felt themselves to be falling in recent decades. That 1971 income that was roughly the same as today’s? Then, it would have bought you a nice house in a good neighborhood

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<sup>2</sup> Beverly Daniel Tatum, “Talking about Race, Learning about Racism: The Application of Racial Identity Development in the Classroom,” *Harvard Educational Review* 62 (Spring 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Marcia Mount Shoop, “Temple Tantrum.” <https://gcpcusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/030418-Temple-Tantrum-MMS.pdf>. Sermon preached at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, 3/4/18. Accessed 3/18/18. Quote is from Steven Stosny, “Anger Problems: What They Say About You.” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/anger-in-the-age-entitlement/200812/anger-problems-what-they-say-about-you>.

with a decent school system, with about half left over for food and clothing and savings. Today, that income buys...well, let's just say it buys a lot less.

Kimmel goes on: American white men bought the promise of self-made masculinity, but its foundation has all but eroded. The game has changed, but instead of questioning the rules, they want to eliminate the other players...They fall back upon those same traditional notions of manhood – physical strength, self-control, power – that defined their fathers' and their grandfathers' eras...They're passing on to their sons the same tired and impossible ideals of manliness and the same sense of entitlement. And they will spawn the same growing rage.<sup>4</sup>

The name of that book again is *Angry White Men*, by Michael Kimmel. And Jesus said, “Those who love their life lose it.”

Where are you in your Lenten journey? Perhaps you don't see yourself in either of these examples; both are rather white and male. Or maybe you do. Or you will. I'd like to distance myself from that first story. It's why I prefaced it with: “a few years ago,” this happened. But you know, if I'm honest, sometimes this anger comes out of me that I didn't know was there. Or jealousy, or apathy, or ignorance. I thought about the Michael Kimmel book when I heard Marcia's sermon, because I used it for a class on gender and the church that I taught last year to a group of ministry students. They did not like that book. ‘What are we supposed to do with this?’ they said. Not one of them recognized themselves in the text, and I, after I assigned it, I froze up. Because I did recognize an ugly part of myself in it, but what I wanted to say, there wasn't room in that classroom to say it. ‘What are we supposed to do with this,’ and what I wanted to say was, ‘Well, we're supposed to repent.’

“The hour has come,” says Jesus, “for the Son of Man to be Glorified.” Glorified, he says, meaning the cross, but not simply for the sake of pain. The cross isn't about embracing suffering for suffering sake; it's a judgment on the things of this world that cause suffering. You may not see yourself in these examples, but we nonetheless, from time to time, sometimes its all

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Kimmel, *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era*. (New York: Nation Books, 2013), p. 14-15.

the time, we nonetheless live in ways of life that isolate us and tear away at us. The cross is a judgment on ways of being that eat at us day after day, that turn me against you, or us against them; it's a judgment on systems that allow us to feel innocent as we perpetuate wrong, that allow us to oppress others without even knowing it, ways that make complicity feel like virtue. In short, the cross is a judgment on sin, sinful systems, sinful ways of being, sin in me and sin in you, and sin in this world, sin that is our separation from the love of God in Christ Jesus. "Now is the judgment of this world," Jesus said, "now the ruler of this world will be driven out." Jesus didn't head to the cross because he thought putting people to death was a good idea. He went the cross to show Imperial execution, colonialization, intolerance, hate and violence were anathema to the love that he proclaimed and disclosed and shared. He went to the cross to show Rome its own foolishness. "Whoever serves me must follow me," Jesus said.

But he also said, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Glory. And here's where our idea of redemptive suffering gets things half-right. That outdated idea is half-right, because growth is painful after all, but it's not pain for its own sake. Let's be clear here because it's easy to get confused. We've all heard a series of half-truths about the cross that have created a lot of heartache, and shame, and bad hallmark cards:

"Everyone has their cross to bear"

"God doesn't give you more than you can handle"

"God helps those who help themselves."

They're all well-meaning and half-right platitudes, but they're also wrong, because God does not cause needless suffering. God is not the cause of suffering, but rather accompanies us in our suffering, gets lost with us in our suffering, but also, and also, God accompanies us as we grow,

and growth is painful sometimes, and necessary. Sanctification, theologians call it, by the power of the Holy Spirit; it's not for the faint of heart.

Growth is painful, so we avoid it. It's easier to blame someone else, and God knows, there is enough blame to go around these days, in this world, this nation, in Asheville: blame the Republicans or Democrats, blame the President, blame Congress. You turn on any late-night show, open any social media, there it is. Everybody else is the problem, throw'em all out. (pause) But in what ways do I, do we, participate in the sins of this world, do we benefit from them, do we practice them? It's rare, not non-existent but rare, to hear vulnerability and transparency and accountability today.

Font and Cross. Resurrection, glory, there in our beginnings, in the Jordan, at the font. You were promised at birth that you are a redeemed child of God. But also, at our endings, resurrection and glory, because the good news of the cross is that the end is not an end. The paradox of the cross is that the end is also a beginning. New life!

We have this picture, from childhood, of repentance as loss. Head down, hunched over, giving up the fun things in life, but that's a distorted idea. Repentance isn't loss; it's a chance at new life, resurrection, when the old ways of life have worn us down.

When you have been at the end of your rope. Those moments in your life, when you've had to turn around, because there was nowhere else to go:

- When hate or anger, the resentment, at things lost, things taken away, things that were rightfully yours, when that anger turns toxic, when it doesn't give life, but rather it takes, and takes, and takes
- When the innocence starts to crumble, when you realize that being a nice person isn't enough, when you realize that you're responsible, just by living in a world of patriarchy, and

white supremacy, and a winner-take-all economy, when you realize you can no longer sit on the sidelines

- When you've been running too long, losing yourself in distractions, in releases, in other people's approval, when you realize you are simply walking through life without a sense of vocation
- When life has eaten you up, and you're tired of trying, when you don't have the energy or the desire or the appetite to move forward, when you're exhausted

God calls you to take up your cross, to find life in the death of ways of being that tear us away from one another, that separate us from God. At the end, we find a beginning, a beginning that gives life. And that's what we call glory.