

Why the True King Doesn't Need to Save Face [Scott Kinder-Pyle]
Luke 23:33—43; Colossians 1:11—20

Hans Christian Andersen once wrote a fable and every now and again, it rings true and appears relevant. It's the story of an emperor who commissions the best tailors in the land to create an outfit of such sheer fabric that all the other royalty in other realms will feel as if they're dressing in rags. And to summarize, one tailor seems to produce a cloth that's so fine it can't be seen with the naked eye. Then again, maybe it's not the eye that's naked, but the emperor himself. And so, the royal entourage parades through a certain village, and all the loyal subjects marvel at the majesty's sharp wardrobe. All but one. A naive, little child, oblivious to the town's morays and unafraid, simply calls out, "The Emperor has no clothes!" And the moral of the story is...?

In Luke 23:34 we read, "*they cast lots to divide his clothing...*" And now, you see, we're not talking about some fable. We're talking about the historic event of Jesus of Nazareth as he suffers asphyxiation while hanging on a Roman cross. No one, of course, believes that he's the King of the Jews. And although, through the centuries religious artists have painted him with a loin cloth, it's very possible that, as he died, Jesus was completely naked, utterly humiliated, stripped of all dignity—and everyone knew it. And the moral of this story is...?

The True King Doesn't Need to Save Face.

This morning, I want to talk with you about this interesting turn of phrase, *SAVING FACE*, because in one sense it's the most beautiful thing in the world—and in another sense it's the ugliest thing in the world. Let's start with the beauty. It's a beautiful thing, for example, when all the five-year-olds on the losing soccer team receive a trophy at the end of the season. And it's a beautiful thing when the friends and family of the woman, losing her hair to chemotherapy, all buy a bunch of goofy hats, and together they all go out to eat at a fancy restaurant. And it's a beautiful thing when your mother-in-law gives you a really obnoxious Christmas sweater—you know, the one with the reindeer nose that lights up—and rather than bury that gift in the bottom of some drawer, you wear it with pride to church. *SAVING FACE* can be a beautiful thing. But it's a learned skill—a little self-deprecating humor coupled with the capacity to deflect attention away from the most vulnerable. And, in this sense, I'm all in favor of experiencing more of it.

But you know what I'm not okay with? I'm not okay when King Charles of the House of Windsor in Great Britain learns that Prince Andrew had been photographed with an underage girl at some resort island in the Caribbean—allegedly having sexual intercourse with her—and to save the face of the monarchy, he takes away the royal titles and boots his brother off the royal estate only to relocate him to a mansion on another estate with extensive grounds. And, you see, considering how that underage girl couldn't shake the shame and fell into despair, I'm not okay with that. And, of course, I have to wonder what another sort of king might want to do with all collateral damage that comes with all the saving, and all the losing, of face.

I count three instances in Luke 23 in which Jesus is called upon to save face—and doesn't:

- Verse 35 when the leaders say, ***'He saved others; let him save himself.'***
- Verse 37 when the soldiers say, ***'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.'***
- Verse 39 when one of the criminals being crucified with Jesus says, ***'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us...'***

Of course, of course, of course... God's Anointed King shouldn't have to put up with this stuff.

Of course God's Anointed King shouldn't be treated like some lowlife criminal. Of course God's Anointed King shouldn't have to experience the indignity of being mocked. And yet, the fact that Jesus of Nazareth does go through psychological trauma (in addition to physical trauma) might tell us something about the Christian faith and how you and I have a lot to learn about what it might mean to follow in his footsteps.

At Penn State, where I went to undergraduate school, I attended a Christian fellowship. And let me confess at the outset, that part of my reason for worshipping God among this group of people was all the cute girls. On one occasion, in fact, I spotted a very beautiful young woman with gorgeous curves and a dazzling smile. And as we came to that point in worship where we were passing the peace—God be praised!—she was moving in my direction. My roommate Terry was next to me, and he greeted her first; and over the din of the room, I heard these words coming very her luscious lips. She said, "Hi, my name's Kathy!" Terry then shook her hand and as she turned to me, I repeated what I had just heard, "Hi, my name's Kathy!" Everyone around us laughed hysterically, and Kathy quipped, "That's my name too!"

Talk about saving face! I lost it! Sometimes there's no way to recover, and I didn't. No one was there to save me... except... I do remember how the worship service continued with a reading from the Bible; and I remember listening as the pastor may have found that place in First Samuel, chapter eight, where the elders of Israel approach Samuel, the last judge of Israel, and say, ***“You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.”*** And I heard quite clearly how God's Covenant People really wanted to be *“like other nations”*— they wanted to SAVE FACE with the Philistines, the Canaanites and even the Egyptians all of whom relished their monarchies. They no longer wanted the rigamarole of hashing things out with the judges, who practice spiritual discernment. They wanted the face of a king to represent their patriotic pride. They wanted a king's face etched on a commemorative coin. And, as Samuel prays about this situation, God replies in verse seven: ***“Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.”***

Did you hear that? God feels rejection. And not only that: Samuel is encouraged not to feel it. It's Face-Saving. It's the King of Cosmos, saving face for the only person who wants to listen. And this is how I connect and I hope you do as well: God wants no graven image to impress, no air-brushed image to titillate, and no image that's been altered by Artificial Intelligence. The True King of the Cosmos does not need to save face. And yet, according to Psalm 27:8, ***“‘Come’, my heart says, ‘seek his face!’ Your face, O Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me.”*** But what face is that?

During the latter part of the sixteenth century, many kings and queens in Europe vied for control of the world's resources and sought to dominate various peoples of other lands under the guise of spreading Christianity. It's during this time of the so-called *Doctrine of Discovery* that Shusaku Endo's novel, *Silence*, is set. So picture the Jesuit missionaries, with their robes, their prayer books and their rosary beads as they wade ashore in Japan. Japan has its own dignified culture and its own dignified religion, and consequently when the missionaries from Portugal convert many local villagers to faith in Jesus, the magistrates and the officials of this proud country aren't about to lose face. They slaughter the poor peasants as a matter of policy until another solution is found. Rather than killing the local converts or priests who minister to them, the Japanese hierarchy decides to put the missionaries themselves to a public test with this ultimatum: *Either you renounce your faith in Jesus or we will kill those innocent and ignorant people whom you have persuaded to follow you.*

Ironically, in the midst of this traumatic dilemma, the mechanism for challenging the missionaries to renounce their faith happens to be the face of Jesus. Etched upon this copper-metal plaque is the image so often seen in medieval paintings, the face of a white man with blue eyes and a nice, coiffed dark beard. They called this plaque the *Fumie*, and if the proud Portuguese Christians refused to step on it, they would live. But they would live to see the people they had led to Christ put to death in the most excruciating and sadistic ways. And what do you suppose happens?

Well, just as one of the missionaries, Father Rodriguez, is about to save the face of the Institutional Church by refusing to step on the face of Christ, a voice breaks the silence: “Trample! Trample! I more than anyone know the pain in your foot. Trample! It was to be trampled on... that I was born into this world” [*Silence*: 171].

Now you probably couldn't care less what some Japanese author has to write about Jesus; but maybe it's extremely relevant to something you do care about very much. And that is, SAVING FACE. In fact, I would argue that you're here at Northwood Presbyterian Church today because you want to save face. You want this congregation to succeed. You want us to matriculate down the road. You want the new pastor to arrive on the scene and set things straight. Your time is valuable. Your talents are valuable. Your money, to be sure, has value. And you don't want to lose face value on the investment you've already made. There's no use denying this; you care about saving face, and that can be so beautiful... or not.

Someone, last week, sent me an email saying they've hear a rumor that Northwood might go under if we don't get more people to come. And the person, hoping to save the face of everyone here, listed ten or more things we could do to insure that doesn't happen. But there's no guarantee, is there? All there is—is the face of King Jesus, and as it reads in Colossians: ***“He is the head of the body, the church, he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.”***