

“Today you will be with me in paradise”

Luke 23:39-43

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on the Second Sunday in Lent, February 21, 2016]

I

All four Gospels—

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—

want us to understand that Jesus was crucified between two criminals.

This seems to be one of the earliest and most important traditions about our Lord.

The early Christians understood this to be the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

Isaiah 53:12 reads, *“He was numbered among the transgressors.”*

Think about the implications of this:

Jesus was not numbered among the high priest Caiaphas and the other members of the religious establishment.

He was not numbered among the politically connected.

He was not numbered among the upstanding pillars of the community—
the civic leaders,
business leaders,
or ecclesiastical leaders.

Jesus suffered “outside the city wall,”
far from the good neighborhoods,
beyond the pale,
cast out from the company of decent people.

Crucified between two criminals,
he was numbered among the transgressors.

II

Episcopal priest Fleming Rutledge tells about a man from Eastern Europe who was painting her house.

He was upset about what was happening to his neighborhood—
he said there was a “bad element” moving in.

Rutledge writes:

The phrase stayed with me. What he meant was that the new neighbors were a different color and spoke a different language. How quickly we assign our fellow human beings to the category of “bad element.”

Throughout his life, Jesus aligned himself with the “bad elements.” In his death, it was the same. He was crucified between two ‘malefactors,’ two wrongdoers.

Crucifixion was for what we would call ‘common criminals.’”

Uncommon criminals,
what we would call “white collar criminals,”
those who come from privileged backgrounds with influential
connections,
would never have been crucified—
which shows that 2000 years later nothing has changed:
capital punishment still falls heaviest on the poorest segments of the
population.

It is important for us to reflect on the fact that Jesus did the exact opposite of what you and I would do.

We tend to want to avoid the dregs of human society.

Jesus voluntarily becomes a part of the dregs himself.

He was numbered among the transgressors,
for only “bad elements” were crucified.

III

Luke tells us,

“When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.”

We are used to thinking of the two men on either side of Jesus as thieves.

But that may not go far enough.

Luke uses a Greek word that literally means “those who do works of evil,” which seems to indicate that they were far worse than petty criminals—they were men of violence, prepared to kill as well as steal.

It might be that they were zealots who sought to overthrow the Roman occupation of Palestine, and carried out acts of terror devoted to that end.

In which case, we might describe them as terrorists.

However we describe them, this is an ‘element’ totally unsuited to be in such close proximity to the Son of God.

And yet during Lent we are invited to think deeply about the profound, even unacceptable, reality of a crucified God nailed up between two violent criminals for the scorn of the passersby.

No such image of God has ever been imagined in all the history of religion.

No one has ever matched this story for sheer perversity—
 the divine redeemer “defiled and put to scorn,”
 obscenely displayed,
 reviled,
 mocked,
 spat upon,
 beaten nearly to death,
 naked,
 plagued by insects,
 covered with dirt and sweat and blood and excrement.

It moves us to ask: Why has the Son of God come to this end?

Why is he crucified with such bad elements?

One criminal taunts Jesus while the other seems to recognize who Jesus is.

Does the one who mocked Jesus do so because Jesus didn't turn out to be the liberator Israel had long desired?

Is this taunting criminal like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus,
 who have been told that Jesus' body is no longer in the grave,
 but they leave Jerusalem because, as far as they are concerned,
 this Jesus does not appear to be the one they had hoped would
 "redeem Israel"?

After all, what kind of redeemer ends up on a cross?

We cannot help but be struck by the contrast between the two criminals.

The first one is angry...
 bitter...
 spiteful.

In his pain he lashes out at the man on the middle cross:

*"Hey, if you are the Christ, prove it!
 Save yourself...
 and while you're at it, save us too!"*

The second criminal somehow recognizes Jesus to be innocent and he rebukes his fellow criminal:

*"Hey, man...what's wrong with you?
 Don't you have respect for anything?
 Doesn't anything scare you?"*

*"We're both guilty...
 we're getting what we deserve.
 But what has this man done to deserve this?"*

IV

We can't help but wonder—

What did the second man see in that dying, tortured face?

What made it possible for the second criminal to recognize that this loser hanging on the cross will come into a kingdom?

Did he know of Jesus?

Had he heard stories of Jesus' teachings about justice, love, and forgiveness... stories of how he healed the sick and feed the hungry?

Did he overhear when Jesus said,

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"?

He painfully turns his head to look at Jesus,

and here we must note something that is amazingly important:

He is the only person in the gospels who ever addresses Jesus by name.

"Jesus," he says, *"remember me when you come into your kingdom."*

It is beautiful to recall that this was the same name given to him at the Annunciation,

when the angel Gabriel told Mary what to call her son.

It was the name that Mary and Joseph called him when he was a baby, when the picked him up and patted him and held him close:

"Don't cry, Jesus...it's okay, Jesus."

It was the name his extended family used when he was growing up in Nazareth:

"Joseph, how is your son Jesus doing?"

It was the name his friends used when they called to him to play games with them:

"Jesus, Jesus! Over here!"

It was the name that the adults in Nazareth used every day:

"That Jesus is a fine carpenter."

so that he can go on with his life,
even at the expense of others' lives.

The second criminal also asks for salvation.

But he sees it not as an escape from pain, suffering, and death,
nor as a way of avoiding the consequences of his actions,
but as hope of what will happen beyond death—
in that distant future time when,
the Jews believed,
the kingdom of God would be established.

He asks just one thing of Jesus—

“Jesus, when you get to your kingdom...don't forget about me.

Remember me, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

V

Then the man on the middle cross speaks for a second time.

Remember that his first word—

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”—

was a prayer for the forgiveness of those who put him on that cross.

Now his second word is addressed to the criminal beside him who asks that he might be remembered when the kingdom comes.

“Truly I say to you, before this day is over you will be with me in Paradise.”

The word *Paradise* comes from a Persian word that means “garden” or “park.”

The king's garden was a walled garden that was a place of profound beauty.

Sometimes it included a menagerie of exotic animals, like a zoo, combined with beautiful flowers, trees, and fountains.

When someone was honored in ancient Persia, they were given the privilege of walking with the king,
sharing companionship with the king,

in his royal gardens,
in Paradise.

Paradise was also believed to be the location of the Garden of Eden.

Jesus told him, you will be with me in a place as beautiful as the Garden of Eden.

Jesus says this promise will be fulfilled “today.”

Not in some distant future time,
not in the sweet by and by,
but “today you will be with me in Paradise.”

But even more important than the word ‘today’ are the words “with me.”

The thief on the cross says, “Don’t forget to remember me.”

Jesus responds, “Today you will be **with me.**”

More than anything else in the Bible, this describes for us what heaven will be like.

Some people think of heaven as an actual place...
a place of literal gates of pearl,
streets of gold,
and mansions “just over the hilltop.”

Such images are drawn from New Testament texts that use symbolic language for things that are too wonderful for words.

But the simplest and clearest New Testament idea about heaven is found in this second word from the cross—

heaven is where Jesus is.

This echoes what Jesus tells his disciples in John 14...

“...I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, that where I am, there you may be also.” (14:2-3)

Heaven is not so much a literal physical place—

although some Christians hold to that belief—
as the spiritual state of being in the presence of Jesus.

Adam Hamilton tells a story to illustrate the point:

There was a doctor who made house calls back in the day when that was what doctors did, and this doctor always took his dog with him in his horse-drawn buggy.

One day he visited a dying man, and as he went into the man's house, he left his dog on the front step. The dying man said to the doctor,
"Doc, what's it going to be like—heaven—what's it going to be like?"

At that moment the doctor's dog began to scratch at the door, whimpering and whining to get in. The doc stopped and said, "Do you hear that?"
"Yes," the man replied.

The doctor continued:

"That's my dog. He has never been inside your house. He doesn't know what's on the other side of the door. All he knows is that his master is in here, and if his master is in here, it must be okay."

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas writes:

"To be 'with Jesus' means we are not 'lost in the cosmos,' but rather we can confidently live in the recognition, with faith, that God is not other than the one found in Jesus of Nazareth... Like the thief we can live with the hope and confidence that the only remembering that matters is to be remembered by Jesus."

How fitting that in Luke's gospel, Jesus' final word to another human being prior to his death would be a word of hope, confidence, and the assurance of salvation.

VI

Sisters and brothers, the story of the cross is a horror story.

But in this brief scene of Jesus and the criminal next to him,
it becomes a love story.

**“No one has greater love than this,
to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”** (John 15:13)

This is a story not of dying love,
but of undying love...
the kind of love that is proven at the point of death.

Can you see yourself as one for whom Jesus died?

Can you say with the second criminal,
“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

It was not only for the criminals, the bandits, and the “bad elements” on the other side of the civilized divide that he died;
it was for us too,
with our masks of innocence
and our delusions about our own righteousness...
his death was for us too.

This is the reason for retelling this story of Jesus and the thief on the cross—
to let people like you and me know that it is...
never too late to be with Jesus...
never too late to be remembered by Jesus...
never too late to be saved by Jesus.

Our sins,
our failures,
our guilt...
are not enough to keep us from Jesus.

There is always more grace in God than there is sin in us.

The 19th century Scottish preacher Alexander McClaren said:

*Two thieves were crucified with Jesus.
One thief was saved so that no one need despair.
But only one, so that no one may presume.*

The gift of Jesus’ life can begin to work in us *today*.

In the hour of trial and torment...
 Jesus will come to those whose hearts are open.

In every moment of need...
 Jesus will be with those who,
 like the second criminal,
 look for God.

Even in the face of death,
 we are not alone.

As Christ died for us,
 so we die with him.

And because his death is an act of victory,
 we also share in his resurrection life.

As the Psalmist said:

*“Yeah, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
 I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.”*

VII

A scene in the third movie of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *The Return of the King*, speaks to this.

It is the decisive battle, the siege of the city of Minas Tirith, and the city is about to be overrun by the armies of the dark lord Sauron.

Gandalf the White Wizard and Pippin the Hobbit are steeling themselves for the final assault, when Pippin says,

Pippin: I didn't think it would end this way.

Gandalf: End? No, the journey doesn't end here. Death is just another path... One that we all must take. The gray rain-curtain of this world rolls back, and all change to silver glass... And then you see it.

Pippin: What? Gandalf?... See what?

Gandalf: White shores... and beyond. The far green country under a swift sunrise.

[They both smile as they look at each other]

Pippin: Well, that isn't so bad.

Gandalf: [Softly:] No... No it isn't.

Jesus says: **Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.**

That isn't so bad, is it!

Amen.

Sources:

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