

April 14 – Palm Sunday

Remember Me

Luke 23: 32-47

Today we come to the climax of the gospel. As I said earlier this season, Lent is a faith journey towards the Crucifixion. Each week as we extinguished a candle on the altar it was a reminder that we are headed to the cross. Today, with the last flame snuffed out we realize we are almost there. Yet, we began our service with a “mini parade” as we celebrated Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. It seems, at first, as if all of the city is embracing Jesus and his message. But then we see the scowls of the religious leaders. Throughout this week they plot to have him arrested, tried and killed. They succeeded. Jesus is crucified by the powerful Romans at the urging of the religious elite. Everything is turned upside down. Jesus is God’s messianic King, the Son of God, whom the crowds acclaimed with their shouts of hosanna, yet before the week is out, he is crucified between two criminals. Jesus becomes a nobody, worse even than a nobody, identifying with the nobodies, even dying for the nobodies. Yet it is precisely here that we see his greatness. As the Apostle Paul would later say, “taking the form of a servant he emptied himself dying upon a cross. Therefore God highly honored him and every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord.”

Today I want to focus on Jesus’ interaction with the two criminals who were crucified with him. Luke is the only one of the gospel writers to use a term for them which means evil or bad. These men were crucified because they had done evil things. One of these criminals joins the crowd hurling insults at Jesus, mocking him. Why would someone on a cross, crucified for doing evil, himself about to die, join in the taunts of those who crucified Jesus? Why do any of us mock or tease others? Because it makes us feel like we are just a bit better than the other person. It takes a lot of physical energy to talk while hanging on a cross with the weight of your body pushing down on your diaphragm. It is amazing he would use what little strength he had to join in the abuse of Jesus.

Yet, if we are not careful, we can act in ways all too similar to the thief. We might hurl insults, put people down, share negative things about others for no other reason than it makes us feel good or because we get a little acceptance in the moment from our peers. We don’t always mean to hurt people’s feelings, we just get into the spirit of things and it happens.

I recall that when Jenny and I were living in Montana there were all sorts of North Dakota jokes going around. These were a version of the dumb blond jokes. I was sharing one of them when a good friend looked at me and said, “You know, I am from North Dakota.” Oh, the shame

I felt. I never meant to put this person down, but that is what I had done. Whenever we share a racist comment, use a put down, belittle someone, and more, we are like that first thief. Think about it, this man is three feet from Jesus and he can look him in the eyes. He is himself dying and his only chance at hope is on the cross next to him, but he's spiritually blind and cannot see it. May we recall his folly and learn from it.

Then the other thief speaks to this first criminal: "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." For me it is remarkable that with all the priests and religious leaders around the cross, only this evildoer proclaims Jesus' innocence. He must have realized that Jesus was not like them. Perhaps it had been his earlier words of forgiveness that made him see Jesus in a different light. We don't know, but then he turns to Jesus and says: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." We don't really know what he was hoping for when he made this request to Jesus. He just sensed that in Jesus there was something bigger than he understood going on. This thief did not know the Apostles Creed. He did not have a certain view of scripture. He had no idea that Jesus was fully God and fully human. He'd never heard of the doctrine of the Trinity. He was dying, and in that moment offered a request to Jesus that reflected an insight, and a simple faith: "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom."

To this simple request Jesus replies: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." I love the fact that Jesus refers to the afterlife as Paradise. The word Paradise comes from a garden that was a combination zoo and arboretum, set apart and maintained for the King and his friends. I've reminded people who were nearing death of these words of Jesus. Picture the most beautiful and wonderful place you've ever been, and realize that it is only a dim reflection of the King's gardens.

One of the things this account reminds me about is that we make salvation harder than it needs to be. We often think it requires right beliefs; lots of work and denial of a lot of things. But this thief asks Jesus to remember him, and he is promised Paradise. There is a part of us that might object to this free gift of grace. We, who have been trying to be faithful much, if not all, of our lives, seem to be treated the same as those who just recently accepted Jesus. But if we think about it, an awareness of Jesus, his love and his power to forgive is all that is required. Whether that comes early in life or is a late opening of our heart to Jesus, it is what God wants from us. When we do this, it will have life changing affects. We get upset because they didn't have to give up everything we did. We need to understand that the journey with Christ is the gift we have enjoyed which they have missed out on.

I think about a man who late in life, after his wife died, started coming to church. He had taken it as a place of pride to not attend all the years they were married. He wasn't going to allow her to force him to go to church. After her death he was feeling lonely and lost and finally a friend convinced him to attend church. He found there new friends, acceptance and support. I remember his words to me one day. "So much wasted time." He didn't think of himself as lucky, not having had to do all the stuff we had been doing as people of faith for much of his life. He saw a loss of what might have been, particularly sharing his journey of faith with his beloved.

The thief's prayer is ours, "remember me." When we are struggling and need strength we want to be able to pray, "Remember me." When we are hurting and need comfort we want to be able to pray, "Remember me." When we have failed and need forgiveness we want to be able to pray, "Remember me." When we are lost and needing guidance we want to be able to pray, "Remember me." The good news is that Jesus hears our prayer and in love responds. When we are in need we are always reminded that tomorrow can bring with it new possibilities. It happens because we serve a God who does not reject us but is always listening for our plea and is quick to respond.

Perhaps what I love the most in this scene is that, to the very end, Jesus is seeking to save those who are lost. He is telling one more nobody that he's somebody. In the midst of the insults, and the derision, and the mocking, he is still focused on this mission. I love that being saved by Jesus was as simple as the criminal saying, "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom." I am comforted to know that life is new whenever we give all of our life to Jesus and say remember me.

In closing let me share a story of one who was much like this thief. Herb was a member of the first church I served after getting out of seminary. His wife was my choir director but he never came to church. Herb had a massive heart attack and almost died. It required him to scale back his activities and change jobs. He started working at the Les Schwab tire store and it was here I got to know him. We would banter back and forth as he had a good sense of humor. One day I said, "Herb, why don't you come to church?" He said, "Preacher you wouldn't want someone like me there." I realized that this conversation was going much deeper than could be handled in a tire bay so I asked him if I could take him to lunch one day. Herb, when we gathered for lunch, listed his sins, he smoked, he swore, he enjoyed beer too much and had not read the Bible since he was a young lad. I am sure he thought that this would end the conversation about coming to church. I took a deep breath and after praying for guidance said, "You are a good person. You love your wife, your children and grandchildren adore you, you have many good friends. If there was hope for a thief on a cross then I am sure there is more

than enough room for you in church. I would be honored to have you become a part of the congregation.” He was quiet for some time, I noticed his eyes had filled with tears. He said, “You really mean that?” When I assured him I did he said, “I’ll have to think about it.” A few weeks later he was in church, soon joined the choir and later I baptized him and took him into the official membership of the church. He thought he was beyond grace, beyond hope. He knew he had lived a life that was less than perfect, didn’t know much about the Bible or theology, but he had a kind heart and knew how to love. That was enough. He finally heard, in his own way, that Jesus knew him and loved him and wanted to save him who had been lost.

Remember me. It is our prayer many, many times in our lives and always the response will be the same. Of course I remember you, I love you, I will be there for you and tomorrow, because of that love, will be a better day.