

Sermon – Sacred Space 10/11 Spokane Friends Luke 23:32-43
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I finally got a job. After months of searching and applying, and really only getting rejected, I can finally say that I am employed. I currently work for the department of correction in their sex offender treatment and assessment program as a sex offender treatment specialist. I'll let you sit with that for a second. If you were to go back and tell 14-year-old me that I end up in prison, I would've say that makes sense but for different reasons...

Because of my new role, I've been thinking a lot about the crucifixion narrative, specifically the part where the two robbers confront Christ.

Hear now the word of the Lord from Luke 23:32-43:

32 Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed.
33 When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. 34 Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

35 The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.”

36 The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar
37 and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”

38 There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the Jews.

39 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

40 But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? 41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

42 Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

43 Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

The second day of my new role, I was fortunate to sit in on group therapy with 12 clients. Part of the curriculum we use, mostly based in cognitive behavioral therapy, requires that all clients give a disclosure of their offense, time incarcerated, age, victim information, and goals for treatment. This helps the clients practice their disclosure for the community, and it also helps them become more open about their offense behaviors.

After 4 years of seminary, countless services attended, led and preached, I can truly say that sitting face to face with 12 grown men who are actively seeking redemption, mercy, and healing has to be the closest to cross I have been so far.

I choked back tears as each man looked at me, introduced himself, and told me plainly why he was part of group. There, in that room, is the closest I have been to the cross. Because, the thing that united all these individuals was the fact that they are actively seeking salvation – and in need of it.

Meanwhile, the good Christian friends I met for dinner after my first day talk about how they believe my clients are entitled to the death penalty and nothing else. How they, these men who so plainly understand the consequences of their actions and who are actively seeking to become better, are the scourge of the earth, subhuman, reminders of the importance of punishment.

It’s easy to love the cross, to love Christ, when we believe salvation only covers those who we think deserve it.

In this passage from Luke, we see two criminals – referred to as “robbers” in the Markian version of this text – confront Jesus while being crucified themselves. Now, some crimes warranting a crucifixion under Roman law included any sort of sedition, treason, or rebellion against the state like claiming to be a king or leading an insurrection. Political or religious agitation like inciting crowds to riot. Armed robbery, banditry, or leading militant groups as well as slave revolts and attempted insurrection. Crucifixion was reserved for free slaves and lower classes, generally for non-roman citizens. These two criminals are called robbers, or bandits in the Greek.

But, the essential portion of this passage is not why the two criminals are there. The essential portion of the passage is this: one thief seeks salvation, he seeks mercy. The other participates in the jest of the crowd, mocking Christ. One criminal sees Christ for who he is. The other joins in the mocking of the state officials.

As I interact with people who want to be more like Christ. I think about salvation and how we often reserve it for those we think are deserving. Those who show real remorse or repentance. But, I don't think that repentance should precede mercy. In fact, I think it's the other way around. We show mercy, first.

I chose to do the job I have now because I believe that healing is a human right. I believe that all people – and I really do mean all people – should have the opportunity to heal. I think this is essentially the heart of this text – even those who are worthy of their punishments still find mercy in Christ's paradise. Those worthy of death are shown mercy by God.

I think that if paradise isn't filled with murderers, sex offenders, terrorists, and enemies of the state, our political opponents, if the crucifixion – the gospel -- doesn't work for them, it surely doesn't work for me, and it certainly doesn't work for you.

I want to end this message with a prayer for enemies. This prayer comes from an 11th century Benedictine monk, Anselm of Canterbury. Please join me in praying for our enemies and those we deem unworthy of mercy:

Almighty and tender Lord Jesus Christ,
Just as I have asked you to love my friends,
so I ask the same for my enemies.
You alone, Lord, are mighty.
You alone are merciful.
Whatever you make me desire for my enemies,
give it to them and give the same back to me.
If I ever ask for them anything which is outside your perfect rule of love,
whether through ignorance, weakness or malice,
good Lord, do not give it to them
and do not give it back to me.

You who are the true light, lighten their darkness.
You who are the whole truth, correct their errors.
You who are the incarnate word, give life to their souls.

Tender Lord Jesus,
let me not be a stumbling block to them,
nor a rock of offense.
My sin is sufficient to me, without harming others.
I, a slave to sin, beg your mercy on my fellow slaves.
Let them be reconciled with you,
and through you reconciled to me. Amen.