

You'll Be With Me

Second in a Series of Seven "Words From the Cross"

March 4, 2020

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Luke 23: 39 One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, [d] saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" 40 But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." 42 And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43 And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Dear Friends in Christ,

Last Wednesday we heard Jesus crying out for His Father to forgive the very folks who were taunting and slapping and whipping and nailing him to the cross, we listened in as the Son asked His dear Father to be merciful to some nasty folks who really didn't know what they were doing.

We ended with this paragraph on the subject of forgiveness, based on Our Savior's first recorded word from the cross.

Forgiveness is not saying to people in your life who have hurt you, "it's ok, don't worry about it." Rather it is saying to them, "what you did hurt me, but Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away all our sins." Forgiveness is not about waiting for people to say they're sorry and making sure they learned their lesson, it's about receiving every day a boatload of God's forgiveness, it's about being grateful for that forgiveness, and then it's about being generous with that forgiveness.

Forgiveness isn't so much about forgetting what people have done against you, it's about making a decision not to get even. It's not about waiting for people to have a change of heart before we can trust them again, it's about being proactive with God's grace as a way of giving the Spirit of God an opportunity to change their hearts.

Tonight we see Jesus hanging on the cross between two nasty criminals, in fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah predicting that he would be numbered among the transgressors. We hear one of the robbers insulting and mocking Jesus, wondering out loud if he was the promised Savior why wouldn't he be saving himself and us? We hear the other robber warning him that he should be afraid of God, reminding him that the two of them were getting what they deserved, pointing out that Jesus had done nothing wrong, then pleading for Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom.

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One more time tonight, I invite you to come to the crosses of Calvary with all of the bad that you have done and the good you have failed to do. Come with the sins you know and feel in your hearts and those of which you're not even aware. Dear friends, come with your original condition of sin and your actual sins, come with your nasty thoughts, your petty words, your less than perfect motives, your self-centered actions, and every last bad habit into which you have fallen, and listen in.

Listen in first of all as Jesus intercedes on your behalf to the Father - forgive them, for they really don't know what they are doing. Father, forgive them, for these are the folks I have lived for, these are the folks I have suffered on behalf of, these are the folks for whom my body has been broken and my blood has been poured out. Father, these are the folks whose debts I have paid, I have covered their sins, I have atoned for their guilt, I have saved their souls. Father, I love them so much.

Two meditations tonight, as we focus on our Lord's second recorded word from the cross.

Two conversations we would listen in on tonight. Conversation #1 is between two criminals in their dying moments, and Conversation #2 is between Jesus and the repentant thief. Conversation #1 is a serious warning, and Conversation #2 is a beautiful promise.

In Meditation #1 we wonder what we might learn from a final conversation between two sinners staring death in the face.

We don't know much about these two thieves in the cross. We know they were Israelites who had the privileges of the temple and its sacrifices. They had the Old Testament and the hope of the Messiah. We know that they had gone down the wrong path in life, we know they sinned, they fell far short of God's glory, and we know that on a little hill outside of Jerusalem, they had one last chance to cry out for mercy to a God who desires nothing more in life than to show mercy.

It's very possible that nearby these two criminals, moms and dads were crying their eyes out over the fate of these their beloved sons. We might label one "too late" and the other one "almost too late."

If we look closely tonight, we'll see ourselves in these two thieves. No, we may not be guilty of armed robbery or a crime that landed us in jail, but daily we sin much and indeed deserve nothing but punishment. No, we may not have gotten our names in the paper with illegal and newsworthy behavior, but day after day our

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good intentions go awry, the good that we want to accomplish gets put off until tomorrow, and the wrong pathways we wanted to avoid we keep going down.

The really good news for both of these criminals was that Jesus the very promised Messiah was nearby. Both of them were as close to a full and complete pardon as I am from the folks in the front half of this sanctuary. The lost thief even had an advantage over the other in that he had a special warning from the other one. He saw the other one turn to Jesus, he needed only to follow that example, but he was lost, while the other was saved.

We think of St. Peter repenting in the Passion story, but Judas hanged himself. Luke records Jesus saying about the end times, "In that night there will be two men in one bed, one will be taken and the other will be lost."

What might we learn tonight from conversation #1? We learn it's never too late until it's too late. Or to say it another way - every conversation, every single conversation in every one of our days is an opportunity to encourage or to be encouraged, it's a chance to warn or to be warned, Or to say it still another way, in 2 Corinthians language, **"For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life."**

In Meditation #2 we wonder what we might learn about living here and now in light of our Lord's promise to thief #2 - Today you'll be with me in paradise."

Thief #2 didn't merely feel sorry for himself, he directed his sorrow to the one who could do something about it. He didn't blame others for the wrongs he had done, he blamed himself. He didn't complain about his punishment, he knew he was getting what he deserved. He offered Jesus no excuses, he didn't say that he was really good boy inside or that he had gone to Sunday School or completed his confirmation class, rather He knew that it was God through the government that nailed him to the cross.

In his terror, he cries out for Jesus of Nazareth to remember him. He didn't ask for a seat of glory among the angels, but rather he begs as a dog would for a scrap, he pleads as a homeless person would for a place to stay for the night, he hopes as a villain would look for a bit of mercy.

Tonight we hear Jesus from the cross, and He doesn't have to think about it and get back to the thief. He answers immediately. Jesus had disappointed Herod by his silence, He had surprised Pilate by not answering, but He's eager to speak to this thief. In this moment, we see the purposes of God. Jesus is the one who ate and

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drank with sinners, He's the one who declared his servants to be his friends, He was numbered among the criminals so that he might be their Savior, He died to take away the guilt of their sin, he died to take away the power of their sin, he died to take away the eternal consequences of their sin. No greater love is there that a man would lay down his life for another man. And tonight we can imagine that no greater joy could God in heaven above have than to snatch a lost soul from the fires of hell, just when the devil thought he had this one for sure.

The kingdom of God is like a medium sized church in a medium sized city full of folks who know they are living in end times. They wake up every morning rejoicing that the sign of the cross has been placed upon their forehead and upon their heart, they see every new day as a day that could be their last, they engage in each conversation as though it could be their final, and they lay their heads down at night admitting one more time they have sinned and fallen short, believing one more time that Jesus and His angels are nearby, and resting one more time knowing that God never slumbers nor does He sleep. They close their eyes, they travel in their minds to the foot of the cross, where Jesus looks them in the eyes and promises, "Soon you'll be with me in paradise."