

Text: Luke 23: 32-43
Title: In Conversation with Criminals
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My grandmother, Winifred Amelia Smith, was a stout stately English woman. From the head of the table, while pouring tea and serving short bread, she was easily mistaken for the Queen-mum. Pious, Bible-believing, and Plymouth Brethren, she lived to be 98.

During the last days of my grandmother's life, with family at her bedside, she memorably prayed, "O Lord, you saved the thief on the cross, surely you can save a sinner such as I..."

It was probably just a common prayer phrase – a line that she heard prayed over and over again. Something akin to "give them traveling mercies on their homeward way," or "Lord we just wanna pray..." But, it's also emblematic of the way in which this conversation between Christ and two criminals has shaped the faith and imagination of God's people.

So, this morning, as we close another year on the church calendar, and celebrate Christ the King, we listen for the voice of God in conversation with criminals. In doing so, may our faith and our imaginations be so shaped and encouraged.

Crucifixion was common in first century Palestine.

As a deterrent the Roman Empire crucified people on the hills outside of town or alongside the roads leading into town. Everyone knew what crucifixion looked like, smelled like, and sounded like – long slow suffering, lost control of bodily function, thirst, suffocation, a naked agony. It was an obscene unspeakable horror meant to strip away any last vestige of humanity.

All four gospels recount Jesus being crucified between two criminals. Historians write that they weren't "common criminals." For while the Romans were a cruel-occupying-force, they didn't crucify people for shoplifting sandals or fudging on taxes. It's more likely that these criminals posed a threat to the empire – violent thugs, insurrectionists, terrorists. The word here in Luke for "criminals" is often translated as "evil-doers" or "malefactors." And yet, Jesus finds his place between them.

The prophet Isaiah put it this way:

He was numbered among the transgressors...

Jesus is not numbered among the righteous and the religious, the bright and the beautiful, or the politically powerful and the socially connected. Jesus is numbered among the felons, the foul, and the guilty.

With little to lose, one of the criminals being crucified joined the crowd in mocking this misguided messiah. By his calculations the one writhing in pain next to him was no kind of savior. Those “Anointed of God” don’t get executed. Kings don’t die with criminals. To think so was ludicrous. So, with scorn and the spit of bile he asked, “Aren’t you the Christ?”

But, after a word of rebuke and caution, the second criminal pulled himself up and sputtered out a last word to Jesus:

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Dear friends, this is the only place in the gospels where Jesus is addressed without some other title like “Son of Man,” or “Lord.” I guess there’s an intimacy when you’re numbered among the transgressors. When you’re broken and beat down, suffocating and caked in dust and excrement – all titles are gone.

It's worth noting that “remembering” in scripture is more than just recalling. To remember is more than a function of memory. This is not akin to, “Remember to pick up some milk and make an appointment for your colonoscopy.” Rather, remembering in scripture often means: to act for. To remember is not just to recall but to act on behalf of....

Therefore, the criminal wasn’t just asking Jesus to think of him. “Do you remember that wonderful chap I was crucified with?” No. He’s asking Jesus to think of him with the power to act.

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

It’s a strange request.

Jesus certainly didn’t look like he was going anywhere worth remembering. Most of his disciples had figured that out and fled. Jesus was doing his dying alone. And, apparently whatever kingdom he ruled was about to come to an end. That was the purpose of execution. And yet, somehow, somehow, this second criminal sees in Jesus some power to remember him.

I’m not sure that my grandmother’s prayer was any different than the criminal’s last words:

“O Lord you saved the thief on the cross surely you can save a sinner such as I.”

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

The plea is the same.
And Jesus responds,

Truly I tell you today you will be with me in paradise.

Now. We often translate “paradise” here as heaven. “Today you’ll be with me in heaven.” But actually, it’s a rather obscure word, probably better rendered as “park” or “garden.” This is the first time the word appears in scripture and it only shows up two more times. In II Corinthians Paul writes about a vision wherein he was “caught up to paradise.” And in the Revelation of John “paradise” is clearly linked to the Garden of Eden.

So, I am not sure that Jesus is talking here about a heavenly home that the criminal would be welcomed into after he expires on the cross. William Willimon puts it this way:

The dying thief did not begin to be with Jesus in paradise once he had drawn his last breath. The criminal began his paradise the moment he recognized the one who hung next to him in agony and humiliation on the cross was none other than his Lord, the master of his life, the sovereign of the Kingdom of God. Or, maybe he didn't know any of that about Jesus... Because knowledge, knowing what we're doing, is far too much to expect of us, who, as Jesus said, "don't know what they're doing." All he said was, "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom." And it was enough.

And it was enough.

Whatever paradise is, it already began there on the cross.

Truth be told, we don't know a thing about the second criminal. We don't know what crime he committed or if his family gathered at a distance to grieve his dying. We don't know if his last words were a last desperate shot or a firm statement of faith. But, this faceless-nameless-criminal offers one of the most profound models of faith in scripture:

He claims his own guilt.
He names Jesus as innocent.
And he asks to be remembered.

There may be no better theology of the cross. For remember, from the vantage point of the criminal there wasn't a resurrection. All he saw was that a dying Jesus would rule as a king. God's power is seen in Jesus dying.

Michael Gerson died on Thursday morning. Gerson was the lead speech writer for President George W. Bush. A graduate of Wheaton College, after his service in the White House he worked as a columnist and political commentator. Bright, measured, conservative, Christian, Gerson was a remarkably gifted young man. He died of complications from cancer at 58.

Gerson struggled with depression for most of his adult life. In 2019 he delivered a sermon at the National Cathedral in which he wove that struggle into the proclamation of the gospel. It was a powerful word. In that sermon, he writes this:

...But there is this difference for a Christian believer: At the end of all our striving and longing we find, not a force, but a face. All language about God is metaphorical. But the metaphor became flesh and dwelt among us.

I love that line. “At the end of all our striving and longing we find, not a force, but a face.”

Dear friends, to celebrate that Christ is King is to celebrate scandal and mystery. For, we are not simply saying that an innocent Jesus died on the cross to take our guilty place and satisfy some cosmic court. Nor are we saying that the kingship of Jesus lies in an inner spiritual world and that the crucifixion was just some sort of metaphorical passion play. Neither are we saying that the cross was just the means to the end....

But we are proclaiming, we’re bearing witness to, we’re stuck with the mystery, that the way of God is the cross. God among us is “not a force, but a face” being crucified.

The metaphor became flesh and was crucified.
This is God’s way to defeat the powers of this world.
This is God’s way to kingdom and kingship.
This is God’s way of being God.

Go figure.

In crucifixion there’s a crown,
in powerlessness there’s power,
in folly there’s wisdom,
in weakness there’s strength,
in suffering there’s hope,
in death there’s life.

I don’t know what the second criminal saw in a dying Jesus. Equally befuddling is what Jesus saw in the criminal – other than his humanity.

But, even with his last few words Jesus makes it clear that his kingdom is for the last, the lost, the least, the beat down, the passed over, the marginalized, and the guilty. Even as he is dying, Jesus makes it clear that his kingdom is for us.

So, this morning may we join my grandmother and this criminal:

Remember me when you come into your kingdom.

That seems like enough.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.