

## “AT THE CROSS” – part 2

Psalm 103:1-18; Luke 23:26-43

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In this Lenten season, we are focusing on Jesus’ words from the cross.



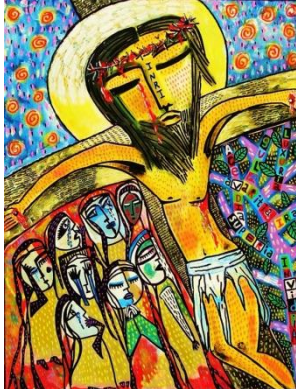
Today, we finish Luke’s account of the crucifixion. Last week we read the end of the story. Today we pick up the front half. There are seven sayings of Jesus from the cross. Three occur here in Luke. Three different sayings occur in John. And the seventh saying is shared by and unique to Matthew and Mark. Among the four gospels, there are essentially three different versions of what Jesus says on the cross. On Good Friday we usually collapse the three versions into one and end up losing the particular emphasis of each gospel. This series allows us to take each set of sayings and interpret them in the context of the gospel to which they belong.

As I said, Luke has three sayings. Last week, Janet talked about “Into your hands, I commend my spirit.” Today, we pick up: “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing” and “Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” The first thing I want to draw your attention to is what is not in Luke’s version: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”



This saying appears without any other sayings in Matthew and Mark. I believe it will be Janet's problem to explain that to you another week, but its absence is conspicuous here since most scholars agree that Luke had a version of Mark's gospel from which he worked. In other words, he was likely aware of this saying, but chose not to mention it. Instead he substitutes three other sayings that reject the very idea that God might abandon Jesus. First he addresses God with the expectation that God will indeed forgive his oppressors. Then, in conversation with one of the criminals being crucified alongside him, he declares his conviction that they would be together, presumably with God, that very day in paradise. And then with his last breath, he entrusts his spirit to God. There is not the slightest inference that God has abandoned Jesus on the cross. Quite the reverse, in fact.

Even, or perhaps especially, at the cross, God is present.



Luke's emphasis throughout the gospel is that in Jesus, the kingdom of God has arrived. Wherever Jesus is, there is the kingdom of God. And its first signpost is forgiveness. The first thing Jesus does from the cross is to forgive those who put him there. Walter Brueggemann puts it this way:

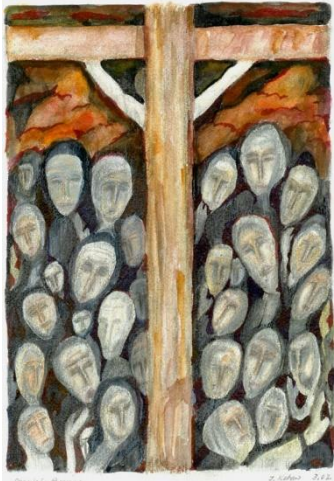
“It is as though he seizes the initiative and wants to frame his execution in a specific way by making this prayer at the outset. Before you do anything of the process of execution, know my attitude toward you. Know that I will not hold a grudge against you. I will forgive you who do the actual killing. I will forgive the authorities who do not even come to Calvary but who have engineered the killing. I will forgive you because it is my most elemental propensity to forgive. It is my signature act, that for which I am best and most faithfully known” (p. 2).

Now maybe this seems too easy for you, that forgiveness so readily given seems to cheapen the act. No one asked to be forgiven for their role in this tragedy. Most, if not all, of us would need to pass through some kind of process, similar to grieving, before being ready to forgive.

On a rational level, most of us know that we should forgive others, that harboring grudges only does harm to ourselves. Failure to forgive often results in bitterness, in truncating our emotions, and in handicapping ourselves as we build other relationships. But we also know that if we move to forgiveness before we're emotionally ready that we can do other kinds of harm to our psychological well-being. Forgiving while one is in process of being harmed seems extreme, and probably unhealthy.

So, it will come as no surprise that this particular saying is actually missing in some of our oldest manuscripts of Luke. We can't be sure whether a later copyist deleted the saying or added it because they saw it as a way of making clear the centrality of forgiveness to Jesus'

character and teaching. Forgiveness does indeed lie at the heart of Luke's gospel, but apparently some of the early Christians, saw forgiveness spoken from the cross as going too far.



Setting aside the question of the healthiest psychological process to go through when arriving at forgiveness, I think we can agree, that there are few experiences more profound and healing than the genuine experience of forgiveness, whether on the giving or receiving end. One could argue that forgiveness lies at the core of all the action in the Bible. Adam and Eve fail to trust God by violating the one command given them. So God boots them from Eden, but not before clothing them and equipping them to live beyond the garden. Cain kills his brother Abel and God punishes him by exiling him from the family, but not before placing a mark upon him that will protect him from others taking vengeance. Again and again, Israel sins and God forgives. The Psalms speak of God's mercy extending to a thousand generations while God's anger is exhausted after a much shorter time span.

We don't do forgiveness easily, but according to Luke, it's evidence for God's presence. What would happen if we fostered forgiveness and strove to make it a part of our character, if we developed, as Desmond Tutu calls it, a "forgiveness mindset?" This strikes me as an important discipline in the life of Christians and an essential piece of what Luke means when he writes about "taking up your cross daily."

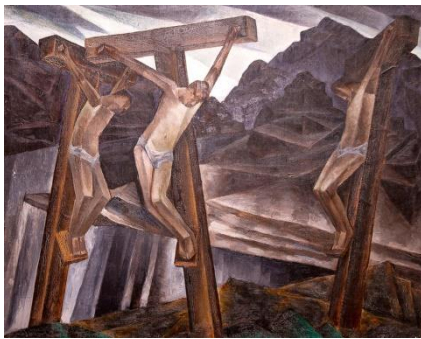


To take up the cross meant for Jesus in the first place, to begin with the practice of forgiveness. It is precisely here that God most often initially enters into our lives and our awareness.

One of the things we hope to accomplish in this look at the words of Jesus from the cross is to gain some insight into what it means to follow Jesus, to take up our own cross. These first words from Luke's gospel should remind us that following Jesus is not just an intellectual exercise. We shouldn't see his words as automatic or routine. They arise from a context of physical abuse, of rejection, denial, and betrayal. Jesus knows he's been wronged and he doesn't forget it; but he transforms it by appealing to one whom he know can heal and make right, one whose presence changes everything.

So we are not called to become academic in forgiveness, but to feel the pain and place it with one whose very presence heals. Following Jesus means binding our pain to the pain of Christ and uniting our prayer to his that the very direction in which we and our world are headed might change course.

There are two crucified next to Jesus.



One has set his course and holds to it: mocking Jesus along with the soldiers and onlookers. As far as we know, his future is unaltered, like an Ebenezer Scrooge who failed to profit by the visits of the three spirits. But the other regrets his crimes and he sees in Jesus one who is able to change his destiny. He does nothing more than ask to be remembered by Jesus when he comes into his kingdom. Jesus responds with the gospel, the same gospel he has been preaching all along: "today, you will be with me in paradise." Brueggemann breaks this down into three parts. First, it's important to understand that the promise is for today, for now. That's maybe why Jesus doesn't wait to ask for forgiveness for his enemies. For him, the most important moment was always the present. God's love is offered now. Following Christ applies to this moment, to this life, not some far off day or other life. You can see why Mark's version that speaks of Jesus feeling abandoned by God, doesn't fit in Luke. Even on the cross, God is there. Even in our pain, God is there. Even when we do horrible things, God is there... to help, to heal.



The promise is for paradise, a reference not to some other life, but to Eden perhaps, to a restored relationship, in which we encounter God as we walk about the garden. Whatever metaphor you want to use for paradise here, the point is plain. Paradise is for today. The kingdom of God is for this moment.

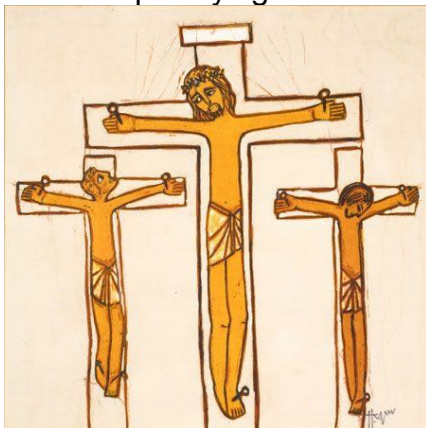
Finally and most importantly, the promise is shared with Jesus.



“With me” are the words that center the statement: “Today... with me... in paradise.” When we follow Jesus, take up our cross and ask him to remember us, we bind ourselves to Jesus. We listen to his words, we seek his healing, we adopt his values, we share his faith. And we experience the presence of God with him.

Such is the Lenten journey, a road we walk with Jesus, trusting in the presence and love of God, even and especially when all is not right with world. It’s a journey that begins with forgiveness, given and received; not a cheap mercy, but one that speaks to our deepest griefs. It’s a journey that ends in the kingdom of God with Jesus at the center.

Luke doesn’t believe in a God who abandons us, even occasionally. Even at the cross, God is there... to forgive, to heal, and to restore. There may be times when we feel abandoned, but Luke keeps saying: “God is there, God is there!”



For those times when you just can’t hear that promise, there’s another gospel, another version... which we’ll get to, but on another day. Amen.