

“Were you there? Where do you find yourself at the foot of the cross (Eric Kolbell)?” Crucifixion was reserved for lower-ranked, more marginal folks like violent criminals, unruly slaves, and rebellious foreigners who claimed kingship not sanctioned by Rome. Crucifixions were carried out publicly and “were for what we call ‘common criminals.’ Uncommon criminals, criminals from privileged backgrounds with influential connections, would never have been crucified” (*The Seven Last Words*, Fleming Rutledge). Think about that for a moment. Today’s final character in our Lenten series is one who is crucified alongside Jesus. He is known as the good thief. All the gospel writers agree that Jesus did not die alone, as he had two transgressors on either side of him (Isa. 53:12). Though Luke is the only one who reports his conversation between Jesus and these two criminals. Luke’s Gospel is known for highlighting Jesus’ concern for the least, the last, and the lost. Jesus’ death by crucifixion puts him- and his followers- in such company. It is said that you can tell a lot about a person by the company they keep. In life and in death, Jesus associated with sinners and this bothered some of the religious leaders greatly. Jesus kept welcoming sinners and eating with them. It is not surprising, then, that only Luke’s Gospel records a conversation Jesus has as he hangs dying on the cross. Before turning to God’s Word, let us first pray.

PRAY. READ. Luke 23:32-43.

In the past few weeks, several parishioners or friends of Triune have died. It has been a sad time. This past Tuesday was an especially heavy day for the staff. We received word that Christine Robinson had died early in the morning. Also Cheri Shumate, a Triune staff member, received word that her only brother and sibling, Jay, died unexpectedly Tuesday morning. We know that in life and in death, we

belong to God and yet, hearing about several deaths in a row, especially when we haven't seen people in a while is hard. Christine worshiped here at Triune; she participated in and helped to lead Roundtable, and she had been clean from her heroin addiction for a couple of years. Christine would call Don weekly to remind him to pick her up so that she didn't miss church on Sundays. As we sat around tables for our weekly staff meeting, you could feel the grief and sadness. Tandy led us in a beautiful devotion and pointed to the seat Christine occupied during Sunday School. I then invited people to share any stories they had about Christine. One of the first ones shared was the first time one of the staff members met Christine, it was in Roundtable, and someone was sharing what a criminal record they had. Christine, who was admired by her peers and by the staff for her tenacity, faith and strength, leaned her head back and laughed out loud. She said something like, "You think your wrap sheet is long?! You should see mine!" Though I didn't have the privilege of getting to know Christine, I first learned of her in a staff email in September from Robin asking for prayers for her upcoming pardon hearing. Christine received her pardon in October! I imagine from what I've heard shared about her that Christine made others feel at home- not judged- and reminded them that if she was a beloved child of God with her long wrap sheet, then others were worthy of Christ's redeeming love.

We're all more than the worst thing we've ever done. Sadly, some of us hold on to and believe that our labels are who we are. The gospel writer Luke calls the two others being crucified with Jesus- one on his left and the other on his right, "criminals," which meant "those who do evil works." We aren't told what their crimes were. However, Matthew and Mark refer to them as "bandits" or "armed

robbers.” We aren’t told their names, either. A few centuries after Jesus’ death, in the Apocrypha, a group of writings that weren’t included in the Bible, the Gospel of Nicodemus lists them as Dismas and Geras. Dismas is known also as the “Good” or “Penitent” thief, while Geras is known as the thief who joined the leaders and the soldiers in mocking Jesus. However, we don’t know that these were their names for sure. This scene of Jesus and these two criminals is “among the most powerful in all the Bible. Jesus, the only fully righteous and sinless human being- he who spelled out his mission statement as one who ‘came to seek out and to save the lost’ (Lk. 19:10), had his final conversation with a criminal” (Hamilton).

“Even on the cross, Jesus was surrounded by controversy, being attacked from one side and defended from the other” (Taylor). While hanging on a cross the first criminal joined the mocking from those on the ground saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us”(v. 39)? It’s interesting that the first criminal also adds for Jesus to save him and the second criminal, too. What made this second criminal snap back at the first criminal’s mocking of Jesus? What was it that this criminal saw in Jesus? Was it something he had heard about Jesus from others? Or was it during the hike to Calvary, while carrying his cross, that he noticed crowds gather for the One before him and he knew, for the first time the weight of systemic injustice? What did this criminal see in that dying, tortured face? Was it while they nailed them to their crosses, that he saw his neighbor and knew that he was innocent? Or was it when he heard Jesus say, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing” (v. 34)? The theme of forgiveness, so central to the gospel, reaches its fullest expression here. What sort of kingship

did he glimpse there on that cross? We aren't told what exactly it was that made the second criminal really see Jesus and say harshly to the other criminal, "Don't you fear God, seeing that you've also been sentenced to die?" (v. 40).

Regardless of when or how, this one called the good thief seemed to be reflecting on or rethinking life in response to Jesus' character and mercy. He admits that he and the other criminal are getting what they deserved but not Jesus- he'd done nothing wrong to deserve crucifixion. How did he know that the One dying beside him was blameless? Pilate and Herod both said the same thing, but we know how that turned out. Somehow- this man called a criminal knew that Jesus was not only innocent but also the Messiah- the One who saves. And maybe just maybe he hoped that...Jesus could remember him- could save him- when he comes into his kingdom. Remember is a loaded word. When God 'remembers' in the Old Testament, it has a distinctive meaning. When God remembered individuals, God delivered them. Here "remember does not mean 'to think about' or 'to recall to mind.' When God 'remembers,' he does not just think about us. He acts for us, with power to save" (Rutledge). When the criminal calls Jesus by name and asks him to remember him, he means "help me and deliver me, Jesus" (Hamilton).

"The good thief knew two things about himself-1) that the world had not been fair to him and 2) that he had been fair to it. While so many had been drawn to Jesus because of the magnetism of his power- to heal, to preach, to rouse, to defy convention- maybe this man was drawn instead by the grace of Jesus' powerlessness? For him, the last convert of Jesus' earthly ministry, death no longer held sway" (Kolbell). Unlike those mocking Jesus, the good thief

understands that Jesus really is a king- and that Jesus' death on a cross will neither end his kingship nor keep his kingdom from coming" (Susan Robb, *Seven Words*). In preparing for today's sermon, I read of several people who didn't think the good thief was truly saved by Jesus because he wasn't baptized or he didn't truly repent. I know folks who said the same thing about Judas, who Tandy preached about a few weeks ago. How do we know that? And even if he wasn't baptized, Jesus doesn't ask him for his credentials to become a believer. Jesus simply acknowledges his confession and belief by telling him, "Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (v. 43). Jesus doesn't say tomorrow...or when he gets his life together or when he does "A, B, & C," he says today. "Beginning today, Jesus promises, you will no longer be defined as a criminal crucified for his crimes. You will be a new creation, at home and in harmony with the Creator of the world" (Robb). Jesus' words to the thief on the cross demonstrate the great mercy that God shows. Even as a criminal was dying for his crimes, Jesus offered salvation. This man had faith the size of a mustard seed and that was enough for Jesus (Hamilton).

Do you remember in Mark's Gospel (10:35-45) when the disciples, James and John respond to Jesus' foretelling of his death and resurrection by requesting what they thought were privileged places of supreme honor in seats at Jesus' right and left in Jesus' glory? In Matthew's Gospel (20:20), it is their mother who asks on their behalf. James and John (nor their mother) really don't appear to have a clue, and Jesus even tells them this. "James and John immediately request the places of honor when Jesus enters his glory, and they do not understand **that the ironic place of 'glory' is the cross- and that two criminals will 'sit' on his right**

and left there” (*Feasting on the Word*, C. Campbell, p. 189). Jesus then reminds them again that he came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (10:45). Who are “the many?” Just like who are the “them” in forgive them, Father? We could spend all of our lives trying to play God and determine who is included on this list. As a matter of fact, some of us are really good at making decisions for God about all the people we think aren’t going to be in heaven. Yet, the last time I checked, none of us are Jesus! “Who are we to say that Jesus’ words to the dying thief on the cross do not reflect the heart with which Jesus- who is the final judge- will judge us? I pray to God that this is precisely how he will look at us: looking beyond all that we have done and said wrong and seeing that we longed to be with him and that we put our trust in him” (Hamilton).

One needn’t have committed a crime to experience the humbling grace of unmerited love. We all come before Jesus as sinners in desperate need of saving. Sin is sin is sin. Why do you think we confess our sins each week in worship? “When we love others despite the circumstances of their lives or the specifics of their worst decisions, we are doing for them as Jesus did for the thief. And conversely, when we sacrifice our own egos, confess our own fears and failings, and receive mercy from another, we are, like the good thief, allowing God to come into us in this way. This willingness to receive love, as the good thief does, is truly a moment of receiving God incarnate, in the form of a friend, a family member, or perhaps a complete stranger, who in that moment loves us not because of who we are but regardless of it” (Kolbell). How many of us have considered ourselves or others a hopeless case or unsalvageable? Can you see

yourself as one for whom Jesus died? One who has been pardoned despite a long wrap sheet? Can you say with the good thief “Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom?”