

**“FINAL WORDS FROM THE CROSS:
TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE”**

Luke 23:32, 39-43

Woodbury UMC

February 28, 2021

My parents once owned a small ranch in the Texas Hill Country northwest of San Antonio. It was a second home to them, a place they used for entertaining and deer hunting. Because they actually lived in Corpus Christi more than three hours away, they visited the ranch only once a month or so. The ranch house stood empty most of the time. A young man named Tommy who lived on neighboring property began to vandalize my parents' place while they were gone. He broke windows, stole articles inside the house, and abused my dad's old Army jeep. He was apprehended multiple times by the local sheriff.

My father's reaction to all this was remarkable. Of course, he was angry and frustrated by the repeated violations of his property. But for some reason he took a personal interest in his young tormentor, Tommy. Instead of dismissing him as a hopeless repeat offender, my dad visited Tommy in jail, offering him forgiveness and a fresh start. He pleaded with Tommy to stop his mischief; he offered to help him find a job and get his life turned around. Tommy never took my dad up on his offer. The violations and arrests continued. But Daddy never gave up on Tommy. He kept visiting Tommy in jail, hoping and praying for a miracle in this young man's life.

I've often wondered if my dad was naïve, if he was just pipe dreaming to think that Tommy might repent of his criminal ways and start living a productive life. All of us have known or read about people who appear to be broken beyond repair, people whose behavior is so fixed that it seems impossible for them to change. Is it just fantasy to believe that such people can still be redeemed?

I've also wondered if my dad was wasting his emotional energy to offer Tommy forgiveness, to give him a second chance, and a third, and a fourth. After all, it takes a lot of emotional energy to forgive. True forgiveness is never easy or glib. My dad could have said, "Tommy, what you did is no big deal. It didn't hurt me a bit. I'll just pretend it never happened and let you off the hook." No, true forgiveness is always costly. In my dad's case, it involved having feelings of anger and exasperation with Tommy, but then making a conscious decision to set aside those feelings and reach out to him in redemptive love. The ultimate goal of forgiveness is to repair a broken person and restore a broken relationship. My dad offered Tommy the free gift of pardon; he offered Tommy the undeserved gift of friendship; but Tommy never accepted either gift. Do some people simply lack the capacity to receive forgiveness and be freed of their demons?

In our most honest moments, we ask that question not just about hardened criminals, but about ourselves. All of us have ingrained patterns of behavior, bad habits that are seemingly impossible to break, besetting sins that keep coming back to haunt us. You and I may have done things that make us ask, "Can God forgive that? Christ can turn water into wine, but can he turn this lemon into lemonade?" Truth be told, there is more of Tommy in me than I care to admit.

I thought about Tommy and my dad this week as I revisited the scene of Jesus' second word from the cross. The Gospels report that Jesus does not die alone; but notice that he doesn't

die alongside other religious martyrs. Rather, he is pictured dying among the irreligious, among the dregs of society, which is somehow strangely fitting. Jesus dies just as he has lived, keeping company with sinners. It's not just a fate that he endures but a choice that he makes, a choice he has made all along.

Across the three years of his earthly ministry, Jesus spends very little time with those who are conventionally religious; when he does, he often criticizes them for being self-righteous snobs. He spends much of his time tutoring twelve ordinary men, none of whom are clergy – men who have a checkered past, who are thick-headed and fickle and unfaithful. He performs his ministry among people who are uncomfortable and unwelcome in the temple and synagogue – lepers, tax-collectors, demoniacs, and women who sleep around. As John Wesley would say, the world is Jesus's parish – more specifically, the world of outsiders and outcasts, people who have been dismissed and discarded as unworthy of God's love.

I'm sure you won't be surprised that my ministry is just the opposite of that: the parish is my world. I spend 95% of my time taking care of a Christian institution, rubbing shoulders with people who are respectably religious, who are at least trying to live responsible lives. My guess is that you keep the same good company, especially when you are wearing your Christian hat. What are we to make of an unconventional religious type like Jesus? His ministry is not with "good church people"; it is with the unchurched. His ministry is not with those who are well, but with those who are sick; not with those who are headed in the right direction, but with those who are disoriented and downright lost.

And so, it's not surprising that Jesus dies in the same company he has kept while he is living. Luke says that Jesus is crucified along with two "criminals." Matthew and Mark are more specific – the criminals are identified as "thieves." Luke is the only Gospel to record the words of the men crucified with Jesus or to report a conversation among the three dying men.

The first criminal to speak echoes the taunt of the rulers and the soldiers. In a bitter mood, fighting back at his fate with all the violence of his unbridled soul, he sneers and cries out for help in the same breath: "What a Messiah you are! Get the three of us out of this! Try your hand at that!"

Then the second criminal rebukes the first: "Have you no fear even of God? You're dying too, man! And we deserve it. He doesn't." The second criminal then addresses the third one, who is innocent: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Notice that both criminals ask for salvation, the first in mocking sarcasm, the second in sincere penitence. The one dies in bitter cynicism a few feet from the Savior, who could have extended him mercy. The other receives a hearing and a response: "Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Whenever I hear these words, I'm forced to rethink my assumptions about human nature and divine forgiveness. There is a part of me that believes some people are too broken to be fixed, that they will never change, that they don't even deserve the opportunity to change. I sometimes even believe that about myself.

And then comes Jesus' second word from the cross. For Jesus, there is no such thing as a hopeless case. There is no such thing as a person beyond the reach of redemption. It is never too

late for a person to express repentance and receive forgiveness. You and I may be skeptical of 11th hour, deathbed conversions – you know, prisoners who suddenly “get religion” after living a long life of crime, or dying addicts who accept Christ as their Savior but have no time left to become faithful followers of Christ. We may even be skeptical of our own promises to “do better the next time.” But Jesus shows no such skepticism. He represents a God who is longsuffering and patient, who forgives seventy times seven, whose mercy is new every morning, who offers salvation to the hopeless. “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

Notice that the penitent thief is granted more than he asks for. His good fortune will not be postponed until Jesus comes in kingly power. It will begin this very day in heaven. Like the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame in Jesus’ parable of the great banquet, the criminal will feast with Jesus today in paradise, the place of the blessed.

My mother once taught a Sunday School class for young women in my home church. One of her class members, a mother of three preschool children, came to her one day with an unusual question. “Beverly,” she asked, “when people die, do they go immediately to be with God, or do they have to wait until Christ comes again at the end of time?” She noted correctly that some passages in the New Testament seem to point to a future day when Christ will judge the dead and raise the righteous to eternal life. Other passages speak of the dead as already being present with the Lord. Which is it?

On the surface, this is an abstract theological question, long debated by biblical scholars. But my mother’s friend wasn’t a biblical scholar. She was an ordinary Christian who happened to be consumed by grief. Her young husband had just died of a rare disease, leaving her a widow and a single mother. Her question was personal and urgent. Is my husband just existing in some kind of dreamless sleep waiting for the world to end; or, at this very moment, is he united with Christ in the presence of God?

For many years, L. D. Johnson was the chaplain at Furman University in South Carolina. One day his tranquil life was turned upside down when his daughter Carole was killed in a car accident. Years later, Johnson wrote a book about his long journey of grief in the aftermath of Carole’s death. In the last chapter of the book, he wrestles honestly with the question many of us have asked when a loved one dies and, from our finite point of view, seems to disappear into nothingness. The chapter was simply entitled, “Where is Carole?”

Friends, for me at least, Jesus answers this question on the cross. “Today you will be with me in paradise.” Not in some far-off tomorrow, but today; not as a reward in some age to come, but heaven itself, in the present tense.

As with so many other scenes in Luke’s Gospel, this one is a gospel in miniature: Jesus, the dying Savior among the wretched, two men who appear to be hopeless cases – one who taunts him cynically and thereby rejects his mercy, and one who receives salvation because he trusts in Jesus and looks forward to the kingdom of God.

The question we must ask ourselves is this: “Which sinner will I be?”