

YOU WILL BE WITH ME

CrossWords Series (Part 2)

Text: Luke 23:39-43

I

Each of the three men had been brought to that hill to pay the price for sin. Each had been fastened to a cross and raised up in shame for all the world to curse. Each now hung in agony there, struggling to breathe, clenching his teeth against the pain, waiting for the final hours of his life to drip slowly by. Three men with so much in common and so little. Three voices engaged in one of the briefest yet most universally representative conversations ever held. Three statements that say so much about their lives -- and about ours.

The Bible says that **one of the criminals who hung there hurled insults** at the one who hung in the middle, saying, **"Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"** As I said last week: There is nothing like the blade of suffering to surface the true sap of someone's soul. These derisive words tell us an awful lot about the stuff of this man's life. We already know that he was no Boy Scout. The Romans reserved the cross for the worst of the worst -- for the terrorists and child molesters, the serial killers and abusers.

And yet the words that first criminal spoke tell us even more than about the vile deeds of his life; they tell us about the heart that grew them. It was the sort of heart so poisoned with cynicism that it could be within a few feet of God himself and respond with derision and mockery rather than worship. It was a heart so blackened with blindness, that it could commit the acts of horror it had and yet see no reason why it should suffer the punishment it received. Here was a heart so scarred with selfishness, that it could watch an innocent man being slaughtered, and yet think only of his own pain, or of how the hurts of a saint might be used to save his own skin. **"Are you not the Messiah?"** mocked the one on Christ's left. **"Then save yourself and me!"**

I read those words and it is almost impossible to believe that there could be a heart so dark and wicked; and then I take a good look at my own. I remember all the years that in my cynicism I mocked the idea of some Absolute Authority or Goodness, thinking that all rules were mine to set; that every blessing I was receiving I had earned. To tell you the truth, I would think of that thief on the cross as singularly blind, except for the fact that I often suffer the consequences of working too hard at things that don't matter or too little at things that do; of abusing my body or my relationships; of failing to control my temper or pride, yet still somehow manage to blame someone else, or to feel sorry for myself and cry out "Why me?"

Yes, that figure on the first cross looks unusually *selfish* too; until I begin to grasp how often I have gazed upon pictures of hungry children or the faces of lonely people, but been too concerned with my own struggles to care; until I realize how often I have come to church, looked upon the cross of Christ, and thought only to myself: What's in it for me?; until I recognize how often I have expected a good deal from the world, or forgiveness from others, or salvation from God as some kind of right. "*Aren't you the Messiah? Then do your job. Save ME.*" Those words from that cross on the left? They're the sap that have poured from *this* heart. And maybe I'm not alone.

II

There's something strange about suffering. It brings out the worst in a soul; or it brings out the best. As the French philosopher Simone Weil points out, pain can either become a barrier to our growth -- just a further occasion for the hardening of our cynicism, blindness, or selfishness -- or else it can be a bridge to a greater awareness of our own failings, a bridge to a greater understanding of how completely dependent we have always been upon a Grace that in times of pleasure we too seldom perceive.

For the first sinner on Golgotha Hill, the cross was one thing. But for the one who hung on the other side of Calvary, it was something else indeed. We know no more about him than we do the first man. That he too was an individual who'd done atrocious deeds is certain from the very fact of his presence there that day. But, somehow, hanging there in the shame of that Palestinian afternoon, with flies buzzing at the blood oozing from his wounds, this man's heart found a bridge where the other's had only erected a further barrier.

Maybe it was the hatred he saw mirrored in the faces of the murderous mob below, that caused him to see at last what he had become. Perhaps it was the utter powerlessness of being pinned like a bug to a public display, that shattered whatever corrupt sense of power his acts of larceny had once given him. Maybe it was the gaze of adoration he saw in the eyes of Magdalen, Mary, and John, a gaze he could never remember anyone focusing on him, that convinced him that while he deserved the cross, Christ surely didn't. Or perhaps as his mind began to wander in painful delirium, he remembered a strange tale he'd once heard about a no-good son-of-a-father who'd come to his senses in a pig trough and somehow found his way home. We can't say.

What I can say is that I've known people for whom the crosses of this life have become such a bridge to renewal. I know a woman for whom the hate and criticism directed at her were, strangely, the very thing that it took to wake her up to the lies in her life. I know a man whose utter failure and personal collapse have, paradoxically, been the beginning of his salvation. All across the centuries there have been people who upon some cross of life finally saw how cynical, blind, and selfish they'd been; people who have found in the stories of Jesus a glimmer of hope that maybe the painful floor of reality beneath their feet was not in fact a scaffold but rather a bridge to new life.

My friend, are you one of them? In the words of the second sinner who hung on that hill: **"Don't you fear God, since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong. Then he said: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:40-42).**

III

Of all the sentences ever spoken by man, that last one probably ranks as the most ridiculous. Oh, Jesus might remember his mother, and Mary Magdalene, and the disciple John who stood weeping at the foot of the cross. But why would Jesus remember with favor someone who had lived his or her whole life as cynically, blindly, and selfishly as those two men had -- or as many of us have -- just because at the last moment such a person stretches out a pitiful hand for help?

If those three crosses tell us nothing else, it is that our apparent saintliness is self-deception. If we were to be measured by our deeds or lack of them, there is not a single one of us that would not deserve crucifixion a hundred times over. But here's the miracle: Jesus has already taken our place. His blood has paid the price for our past, and now Jesus is far more concerned with who we are willing to be in the future. We may look at each other as human "beings," as fixed entities, defined by the sins or saintly deeds of our past; but Christ sees us as human "becomings." He is far less concerned with what our hands have done or failed to do in days gone by than with whose hand we're willing to take as we go from here.

But that's the catch. You see, some of us are like the man in the story who arrived one day at the gates of heaven and asked St. Peter for admission. *"Well, what's the password?"* the gatekeeper asked. The man thought for a moment and then responded: "Great is the Lord and worthy is He to be praised?" *"No, that's not it,"* said St. Peter. "Well then," said the man, "God is love?" *"Nope, that's not it either."* "Well, certainly it then must be: "He who tithes will be blessed." *"I'm very sorry, but I'm afraid that isn't it either -- not even close."* With that, the man cries out in exasperation: "Well, then I give up." *"That's it!"* said St. Peter. *"Come on in!"*

Once upon a time, a man hung on a cross stripped of everything the world holds dear. He had no moral credentials to bring to that place; for those he had spelled his utter doom. He had no great theological truths to proclaim, save for the fact that he saw what a great sinner he was and what a great Savior Christ is. The only thing he could offer was this affirmation expressed in slightly different words: *"I give up, Lord. I could never justify myself. Without your grace I am lost."* It was then that the gates swung open wide, as a third voice on that hill spoke his second words that day. Reciting a sentence that rings down through the ages as a word of hope for every

humble sinner since, Jesus said: **"I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).**

IV

I want to ask you two questions in closing, and the first one is this: *Do you have that kind of assurance today?* Do you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that the words that Jesus spoke to that second thief, and that he spoke to his disciples on his final night with them are true of you? Jesus once said to his disciples: **"I will take you to be with me, that you may also be where I am" (John 14:3)** for all eternity. Do you know those words apply to you? The only thing required is that you be willing to give up. Give up your past to Him. Give up your thought that you can earn your way into heaven. Give up your hope that anything of yourself, save what you give over to Him is going to be in Paradise. If you have never surrendered to Jesus Christ in that way, then I'm going to ask you to really pray with me the prayer I'll offer at the end of this message today.

Then a second question: Having received the assurance Christ offers you, *will you offer an affirmation of grace to the other people in your life?* Will you say again to your spouse if you have one: "Sweetheart, I take you all over again today, to be my wife or husband, for better or worse." To your children or your parents: "I take you into my heart again today; forgetting what lies in the past, I am committed to accepting and loving you into the future." To your colleagues and enemies: "Because of what Jesus has said to me, I can say this to you -- I take you to be my friend, not because you are perfect, but because in Christ I see your possibilities." Will you both receive for yourself and offer to others that amazing grace, beginning today?

If you are willing to cross this bridge, then please pray with me...

Lord of Life, some of us have been living our lives like that first man on the cross. We have been cynical about the reality of Your absolute Authority and Goodness, blind to the seriousness of our own moral failures, and more self-absorbed than we may ever understand. Yet this much, O God, we do. Like that second sinner, we realize that we are utterly lost, unless somehow You choose to intervene with a grace we could never earn or command. And so, we give up, Lord. We give up our past. We give up our self-justifications. We give up our sin to You.

You have promised that as we do that right now, what has been a barrier before now becomes a bridge. The slate is absolutely clean. The future is absolutely filled with new possibilities. The assurance is absolutely ours that we will be with You in Paradise. Thank you, Lord. Now help us to go forth to extend that amazing grace to our family members, our friends, even those who before this day, we would have gladly nailed to a cross. For the sake of Him who went there that no one would ever have to again, we pray these things -- in Jesus' name.. Amen.