
THE LAST DAY OF THE CHURCH YEAR

NOVEMBER 24, 2013

ONE ON HIS RIGHT AND ONE ON HIS LEFT

Pastor Jim Dunn

Luke 23:27-43

27 And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. **28** But turning to them Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. **29** For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' **30** Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' **31** For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

32 Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. **33** And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. **34** And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. **35** And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" **36** The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine **37** and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" **38** There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

39 One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, **[c]** saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" **40** But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? **41** And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." **42** And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." **43** And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

“Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with Him. And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on His right and one on His left.”

In one murder investigation, the police had two suspects. They were William Burke and William Hare. At the time, the police knew of three murders that these two men had committed together. But evidence against the pair was not enough. In the one case in which the police had a body, the medical experts could not state the cause of death. So, it seemed likely that Burke and Hare would blame each other for the murders. That would leave any jury uncertain as to which one to convict. So, William Hare was offered immunity from prosecution to confess to the murders and agree to testify against Burke. And then he could go free. Why did the prosecution choose to go after Burke instead of Hare? It was believed that Burke was the more intelligent of the two. He was, therefore, presumed to have taken the lead in their crimes. Well, Hare agreed to testify against Burke. And Burke was convicted. But just days before he was hanged, William Burke described for a local newspaper how he and Hare had murdered not three but 16 people, in all. After the hanging, a mob tried to lay hold of William Hare to do the same to him.

Two criminals. Not one, but two. Luke's Gospel says that two criminals were hanged with Jesus. Though Luke was about to tell how one of those two had a change of heart, he still described both of them as criminals. “Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with Him.” Not only was Jesus wrongfully convicted and sentenced to death. Jesus was mocked in that He was hanged between two criminals. One of those two even admitted that they were getting what they deserved. “We are receiving the due reward of our deeds.”

He was also the one who snuck into heaven through the back door at the last second. Which raises a serious question. Will we be happy with those people who will be with us in heaven? Will we be happy with all of them? A little poem says:

When I arrived at heaven's gate, I saw faces I thought I'd never see...

That line nails the truth. There are people we don't expect to see in heaven. They're lowlifes, oxygen thieves. Like the criminals crucified with Jesus.

But the same poem goes on to say:

And every face showed shocked surprise; not one expected me.

Well, I don't know about you, but my reaction to that line of the poem is... "that's wrong!" Of course I'll be expected in heaven. That line of the poem is not about me. It's about people like that criminal on the cross, that goat in sheep's clothing. No one will expect to see me in heaven? Ya gotta be kidding!

Yet, this poem is directed at you and me. It is aimed at our own cherished views of ourselves. It is aimed at our own arrogant ways of comparing ourselves to others. It is aimed at all the ways in which we think of people as being good or bad, one or the other, and we are the good ones.

Which is a dead end way of thinking, even for us. Because if bad people are people who have made bad choices, then how do you view yourself when you have made bad choices? And then to what lengths do you have to go to prove to yourself that you really are a good person?

You see, **that there were two criminals** crucified with Jesus, and one went to heaven and one did not, does not say that one was bad and one was good. It does not tell us there are two kinds of people in the world: bad people and good people. Both of those criminals, even after one of them became a believer, both of them were deserving of a punishment far worse than death by crucifixion. So are we all deserving of eternal punishment, even if the only bad choice you had ever made was a very tiny one done totally unintentionally. We are all sinners. We are all chaff for the fire. The enormity of what happened to Jesus at the cross, that as the one criminal said, "This man has done nothing wrong," tells us that Jesus did not die for His own bad choices. He died for yours and mine and the bad choices of the "goodest" person you can think of.

So, what separates the one criminal from the other, the one on the right from the one on the left, the sheep from the goats? What separates them is sheep's clothing. You are a goat in sheep's clothing. You are a sinner covered by the Lamb of God, clothed in the righteousness of Jesus by grace through faith. You and I have been made honorary sheep. And that enables you to join with the one criminal to say with all boldness, "I have made bad choices. But that's not who I am. That's what I did and what I sometimes still do, because I am a sinner. But what I am most importantly is a forgiven child of God. Because even though I wished that Jesus had saved me from making the bad choices I made, that's exactly what He was doing on the cross." "Save yourself and us," one of them cried. But saving us was exactly what Jesus was doing by hanging and dying on that cross. He saved us. Saving you from making one bad choice or another would not save you. So, He died for all of your bad choices. That makes you forgiven. And that makes you bold to say, "I am not my choices. I am a baptized child of God." That makes you bold to say whatever your sins, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

This Christ-given way of seeing yourself frees you to see others, neither as good people nor as bad people, nor to try to find the good in people. Instead, this Christ-given way of seeing yourself makes you bold to see others as redeemed by Christ, forgiven even as He said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." To see them as the complex forgiven sinners that they are, messed up by sin, either to a lesser degree or to a greater degree, as in the cases of William Burke and William Hare. To see them as complex individuals, forgiven sinners whether they're walking down the aisle at the grocery store or walking down the hall of death row.

That's how Jesus saw people and why He was often accused of hanging out with the wrong kinds of people. So, it is little surprise that in His last hours Jesus was hanging out with two criminals. He was always seeking the lost, even to the end. Jesus' most precious gift to you of empowering you to identify yourself not by your choices but as a forgiven, baptized child of God frees you to seek those same complex forgiven sinners, who are messed up to a lesser degree or to a greater degree, in order to offer them forgiveness in Christ so that they too may repent and believe in the promise of paradise.

Amen.