

Sermon, Reign of Christ, Year C, November 24, 2019, Jane A. Beebe

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43)

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” These are Jesus’ penultimate words before he dies. They are the words he says just before addressing his Abba, “Into your hands I commend my spirit.” I cannot imagine words more gracious than these. Jesus says these words from the cross, not from a throne—although, as we affirm in the Nicene Creed, Jesus ascended to God’s right hand. So that, too, is reality. We have an extraordinary Crucifix on the wall behind the altar. It is simple and powerful: depicting a human being that is the cross itself.

Jesus is crucified between two criminals. One, along with the Roman soldiers and the leaders, scoffs at Jesus with echoes from Christ’s temptation in the wilderness. “You saved others,” they say. Surely you have the power to save yourself!” In Luke’s version of the temptation, Satan even uses Scripture in his mockery, quoting from Psalm 91:

“...For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.
On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone...”

An inscription has been placed over Jesus’ head, the ultimate derision: “This is the King of the Jews.” (Luke 23:38)

The second criminal is different. He fears God. Somehow he is given the perception to see that while his own sentence may have been just, Jesus is innocent. Jesus has done nothing wrong. Notice that he does not ask Jesus to save him. He does not mock him. He simply asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his Kingdom. *He sees Jesus for who he is.* Perhaps in that moment he is able to catch a glimpse of that Kingdom, a kingdom where death has no sway, however horrific. Jesus replies, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43) I think of all the ways Jesus has healed, sometimes literally taking someone by the hand and lifting them up. We have that beautiful collect in our prayer book that begins: “Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace...” (BCP) Today you will be with me.

As part of my journey back to wholeness from being in debt, I decided to reaffirm my Baptismal vows when the Bishop came to visit. The date of his visit was February 2, the same date as my confirmation in 1986 at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Grinnell, Iowa. I had been an Episcopalian for more than fifteen years. My rector at the time suggested that I prepare for reaffirmation with the Sacrament of Reconciliation. When I had told him about my debt, I had expressed how weighed down I felt. Debt was a weight. There was no guarantee, yet telling the truth about what debt had done to me was one way of alleviating that weight.

Something I had forgotten until now is that my rector was late in meeting with me. I remember sitting on the floor outside his office wondering what to do. Having gathered the courage to even go through with this (I came with a list!), I felt real despair at maybe not being able to go through with it that day. The weight I was feeling intensified. However, I think now there was a purpose in that.

There are two forms for this sacrament: one simple, and one more elaborate. However, in both, the priest declares, “The Lord has put away your sins.” I did feel a falling away of the weight on my spirit. I have never felt Jesus’ presence more palpably before or since. (My rector observed that while my situation was tough (he used worse language than that), it had brought me to that room—an Upper Room if ever there was one). And yet the phrase, “The Lord has put away your sins” did not seem to erase their reality. They had been put away—but not as if they had never happened. My visual image is that of an iron safe to which God has the combination. I did feel that physical giddiness one feels when setting down a heavy backpack—as if I might fall over I felt so light!

Grace operates similarly, yet as a sort of inverse to forgiveness. Grace abounds. (Romans 5:20) If something “abounds” it is full to overflowing, it rises like ocean waves. The word “abundance” comes from the same root. How do we measure grace, I wonder?

While I feel that God released me from the net ensnaring me in the moment that I admitted to myself, to God, and to another person that I was a compulsive debtor and spender, there was still cleanup to do. It took several years, and it was discouraging. A practice that helped me along the way was working towards the tithe. With God's help, I have been tithing, that is giving away ten percent or more of my money, for nearly twenty years. By the way, "tithe" is not a four-letter word. It's a five-letter word.

For someone trying to get out of debt, this may seem counterintuitive to you. However, *my way wasn't working*. I found, however, that on those days when I still felt defeated or ashamed, giving away some of my money turned that feeling around. This is why I think that worked. God gently turned my focus away from what I perceived as my lack to the very real abundance surrounding me: all of God's Creation. Gradually I could begin to take Jesus' words that we hear earlier in Luke to heart: "And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well." (Luke 17:29-31)

In God's upside-down Kingdom, described throughout Luke, giving away a portion of what we have in no way diminishes us. The amount doesn't matter. Living as if we are already in the Kingdom does. As Jesus goes on to say, "Do not

be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (Luke 17:32) This does not mean that I suddenly won the lottery, or was protected from pain and loss: all the usual human struggles. What it did mean was that I could, without the distortion of fear and worry, finally hear Jesus' invitation, Jesus' assurance that a glimpse of the Kingdom was possible.

I think of that beautiful Southern Harmony hymn: "What Wondrous Love Is This."

1 What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul,
what wondrous love is this, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss
to bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul,
to bear the dreadful curse for my soul!

2 When I was sinking down, sinking down, sinking down,
when I was sinking down, sinking down;
when I was sinking down beneath God's righteous frown,
Christ laid aside his crown for my soul, for my soul,
Christ laid aside his crown for my soul!