

Brazen to the End

From the series: A True Story, the Gospel and Forgiveness

Text: Luke 23:39

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"A True Story, The Gospel and Forgiveness." That's the overall theme of our reflections during this Lenten season, midweek, and we have raised the question about the possibility of forgiveness and whether or not it's even moral, and we have seen that attitudes and actions do have their consequences, quite apart from whether or not forgiveness is possible and moral. This evening the meditation is entitled, "Brazen to the End," and I was going to deal with the one criminal crucified with Jesus who was brazen to the end, to be followed next week by the other criminal who pled for mercy in his dying hour. But, next week we'll have a special opportunity to hear The Rev. Dr. Mel White, our evening preacher in a Lenten service of this format, but with a special theme and emphasis. So, I'm going to have to lump the two criminals together and retitle the meditation. Perhaps I could say "Broken or Brazen at the End." That's pretty good, eh? You get the whole thing and I only have half the work, you see. "Broken or Brazen at the End."

Last Lenten season on a Sunday morning I made history; it was the first time from a Christian pulpit that a rebellious criminal got any good press. I suggested that there was something heroic about his "No" all the way to the end. (We only lost one family. No sense of humor, I guess.) Well, obviously, Luke sets us up and his intention is clear. He has that magnificent word of Jesus, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," which will be the text for two weeks from tonight. And then he has the two criminals, the one brazen to the end, railing at Jesus with his last breath, with no intention or indication that there was anything like repentance or second thoughts going on in his life.

And then the other criminal, of course, pleading with Jesus to remember him, acknowledging that what he was receiving was the just dessert of his deeds but pleading for mercy, nonetheless, which mercy was granted him by the promise of Jesus. And, of course, the Gospel intention of Luke was to show the magnificent grace of Jesus and to show two opposite reactions, one a brazen attitude all the way to the last breath, the other a brokenness that opened oneself up for mercy.

If I were to deal only with the one this evening, I would simply have pointed out the fact that one can only receive forgiveness when one is open to being forgiven. I can forgive you for something you do to me, in spite of your desire for it or your openness to it or any response to it. Of course, I can do that. And it will, as a matter of fact, be good for me to do that, psychologically, emotionally, spiritually. But, I can't effect in you the benefit of being forgiven if you are not open to it, and the reason a year ago I tried to look at the rebellious criminal from a little different angle was the fact that we are so quick to look at that snapshot from the cross and to say the one was bad and damned in his rebelliousness, the other was bad, forgiven in his plea for mercy, and premature closure says that's all there is to it. But, that's not all there is to it, really.

The story that has triggered this series is *The Sunflower*, the account by Simon Wiesenthal of his experience as a prisoner in the death camps of the Nazis, who is pulled aside by a nurse to come to the bedside of a dying SS officer who pours out his awful tale of the horrendous things of which he has been a part and for which he accepts responsibility, needing to confess and, pouring out this story in the presence of a Jew because the Jewish people were the object of the terror and the violence of which he was a part. The story ended with Wiesenthal's question, "Should I have forgiven him?" Actually, he listened to the story and he left without saying a word. No word of human compassion or pity, and certainly no word of forgiveness. He just left the room. I think the very fact that he tells the story is perhaps indicative of the fact that he needed to do what that Nazi needed to do. He needed to tell his own story because he has never rested quite easily with the fact that he left a dying man pleading for some word of compassion or forgiveness without saying a word.

But there are many respondents to the story, which Wiesenthal leaves with the question asking each of us, "What would you have done?" Most of the respondents did as one particular British journalist did, saying,

I cannot answer the question, what I would have done. I don't think any of us knows what we would have done, given that circumstance, given the depths of the suffering of those prisoners in that situation. I don't think any of us knows what we would have done. So, I'm not going to judge that. But let me deal with it in terms of the question, What should I have done?

This is one of the respondents who very clearly says there should have been offered some word of compassion, some word of grace, and he, as a matter of fact, points to this Gospel paragraph that we read where Jesus says, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

When you read Wiesenthal's story and when you see all the respondents who struggle over that question, "What would I have done?" or "What should I have done?" you realize the complexity of this matter of forgiveness in human relationships and, of course, ultimately, forgiveness in terms of God and the

Ultimate, the Absolute. We realize that it is just not as simple as we are wont to make it. Forgiveness is such common fare; we talk about it all the time; we use it in our liturgies and in our sermons, and yet, the more I think about forgiveness, the more I recognize what a complex matter that is, for forgiveness must affect something in the one forgiven.

The reason that I say a good word about the criminal who never repented is that he was one of those, like a Simon Wiesenthal. Barabbas, the person mentioned in one of the other Gospels whom Pilate wanted to release, is called an insurrectionist, and the Romans didn't crucify petty thieves. You can bet that all of the crosses that lined the hillsides out of Jerusalem were political terrorists, rebels, revolutionaries, threats to the peace and order of the State, and we know that Jesus made his protest against the way the world was with non-violence, but we know, as well, that there were zealots, there were guerilla bands, there were revolutionaries roaming the countryside, and who of us can say where we would have been in a case like that? Where there is the heel of the oppressor on the neck of a people. We, ourselves, American people, are the beneficiaries of those who rebelled and revolted against that which they considered unjust which was nothing compared to what was going on in first century Palestine.

So, once again, the reason that I'm just not ready to damn that brazen thief is that, like with Wiesenthal, I don't know what he was suffering. I don't know what he went through. I think it's possible for a human being to be so damaged and so wounded that he can never, never emotionally yield his hatred and his violence. It's just too easy for me just to say, "Well, then he's damned to hell."

But, to die that way is a terrible way to die, and Luke was obviously setting up the other criminal as a model modeled after Jesus. What I am experiencing and suffering I have earned, nevertheless, I plea for mercy, for forgiveness. And what's going on in these two cases? What is not going on in the brazen one is that coming to self-awareness that sets him free from his anger and his hatred and his woundedness. That's what's going on. And what's going on in the other one is that same self-awareness that overtook that young German SS officer who said, "My God, what have I done?", whose repentance was deep and genuine. To come to that awareness, a certain integrity of being, an owning of one's life and one's story, is the prerequisite for receiving the benefit and the blessing of forgiveness.

So, is that it, then? In spite of the fact that we handle gently the brazen one because we don't know how wounded he may have been, and affirm the other one because his awareness came before his last breath, is that all there is, then?

It was thinking about that that got me thinking years ago, back in the mid-80s, about the ancient Church's teaching of purgatory, the fact that none of us at the end of our life, in spite of whether or not we may have perceived the word of forgiveness, is ready for the presence of God. That for the best of us as well as the worst of us, there is a good deal of cleaning up that must be necessary, a good

deal more of self-awareness and consequently of repentance and transformation. It was at that point that I began to see the wisdom of the ancient Church's teaching on purgatory and then I came across this marvelous paragraph from C.S. Lewis in his *Letters to Malcolm*, who says,

Our souls demand purgatory, don't they? Would it not break the heart if God said to us, "It is true, my son, that your breath smells and your rags drip with mud and slime, but we are charitable here and no one will upbraid you with these things, nor draw away from you. Enter into the joy!"

Should we not reply, "With submission, Sir, and if there is no objection, I'd rather be cleaned first."

"It may hurt, you know."

"Even so, Sir."

I assume that the process of purification will normally involve suffering, partly from tradition, partly because most real good that has been done to me in this life has involved it, but I don't think suffering is the purpose of the purgation. I can well believe that people neither much worse nor much better than I will suffer less than I or more, no nonsense about merit. The treatment given will be the one required, whether it hurts little or much.

My favorite image on this matter comes from the dentist chair. I hope that when the tooth of life is drawn and I am coming 'round, a voice will say, "Rinse out your mouth with this." This will be purgatory.

And so, you see, I think it's much too simple and superficial to have us live our respective lives, some a little better, some a little worse, but like C. S. Lewis said, no nonsense about merit. But, it's too simple and too superficial to say that at the end of it all one says, "Forgive me," or one continues to say "No" and to have that be the eternal issue of our being. I heard tell some time ago of an old fellow whose funeral was conducted and the family was so delighted by the fact that two days before he died he was led to the Lord by a nurse. Well, that can be wonderful. But, I mean, the family was so happy about the fact that the old man escaped the fires of hell and was entered into the pearly gates because two days before his death he finally said, "Yes."

Does that really make sense? Does that really resonate with you? It doesn't with me, frankly. Much more, our lives are being lived out as a tale that is told and we'll come, sooner or later, before the face of God, and some of us sooner and some of us later may find all of the stuff of our lives that's so sour, causing such dysfunction and distortion, finally draining away, and then, then maybe that moment of awareness will come. And is not salvation finally simply awareness, honesty and integrity before the face of God? Isn't that all God intends in the creation of complex creatures like us?

Christopher Hollis, the journalist who responded to the Wiesenthal story, told of an old medieval legend in which the disciples re-gathered around a table in heaven with Jesus to re-celebrate the Last Supper, and there was a vacant chair until the door opened and Judas entered and Jesus rose and kissed him and said, "We've been waiting for you."

I don't think God will quit until the last child has come to the table.

References:

C. S. Lewis. *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*. Harcourt, Inc., 1964.

Simon Wiesenthal. *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. Shoken: revised expanded edition, 1998.