

The Integrity of Saying No

From the series: Faces Around the Cross

Text: Psalm 8:6; Luke 23:39

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

As I was contemplating the portraits of the four evangelists, and looking at the faces around the cross, I was struck by the face of one who has perhaps found his way into many, many Christian sermons, but one who has gotten consistently bad press, that is, the criminal crucified with Jesus who continued to mock to the end. All four evangelists tell us that Jesus was crucified between two criminals. Mark tells us that both taunted him. But, only Luke carries on a conversation between the two crosses, and in Luke's account we have the one criminal continuing to mock and deride Jesus, even in his own hour of execution, whereas the other, recognizing his fate, pleads with Jesus for mercy and finds it.

Obviously, in the portrait that Luke is painting, we have the picture of Jesus in the middle, and then the criminal on the right and the criminal on the left, two opposite responses. What the evangelist is trying to portray to us is that it is possible to rebel to the end and miss God's grace, or even at the last moment to surrender and find God's grace. Now, quite clearly, that is Luke's intention. But I, contemplating the scene, want to put a bit of a different spin on it this morning. I want to think about that rebellious criminal in a different light than he is usually understood in the Christian Church.

It's so easy for us in the Church to write people off, to damn people to hell, to recognize their rebellion or their revolt, their sinfulness or their wickedness and be done with them. But, as I've been thinking about that scene of crucifixion, it has occurred to me that, far too often, for far too long in the history of the Church, what we have been concerned about is the individual salvation of our souls, even while, perhaps, the world is going to hell, unraveling, full of injustice and oppression. I want to suggest to you something this morning that may be a bit shocking, but which I hope before I am through, you will understand, and that is that there are some things in the world that are more important than one's individual salvation. There are some things that are more important than whether or not one has a cozy relationship with God, and there are some things to which we ought to be addressing ourselves which would get the focus off ourselves and our individualism and our egotism and our selfish concern for our

own salvation. I want to give the rebellious criminal some good press this morning.

What kind of a criminal was he? Well, you can bet he wasn't some petty thief. The Romans didn't waste crucifixion on insignificant individuals. Maybe we get a hint of why he was hanging there from the story of Barabbas that the evangelists tell us about - Pilate wanted to release Jesus or Barabbas, hoping, according to the account, that he wouldn't have to condemn Jesus. The crowd would have nothing of it. But Mark tells us that Barabbas was in prison for insurrection and the more we know about the times of Jesus, that Palestinian society under Roman domination, the more we know that it was a brutal time. It was a land that was occupied by a foreign oppressor. The heel of Rome was heavy on the necks of the people. They were not only under the oppression of a foreign occupier, but under the oppressions, the manipulation, and the abuse of the local aristocracy in collaboration with the occupier. We know that people were being driven off their land; people were being driven into abject poverty. The Roman governors and tribunes had no qualms of conscience to release their legions to slaughter some rebellion here or there. It was a time that ran with blood; it was a time of terrible human suffering; it was a time when there were those who were rising up to say, "Enough." It's the kind of human response that we are not a stranger to in our own world, which is marked by terrorism. We who are so insulated from so much of the pain and darkness of the world read and hear about terrorism and we shake our heads and say, "What an awful thing," and certainly it is an awful thing because so often the innocent suffer while the terrorists seem to have no consideration for human life, not their own or that of others. We wonder what it is that can drive a human person into that kind of mode, that kind of behavior. We marvel that a human being can become so inhuman, so bestial. But, we know it's true. Down through history it has been true.

There have been those who have seen oppression, have seen injustice and have risen up to face it. Robin Hood, romanticized, to be sure, but the one who robs the rich to feed the poor. We remember the story of the French queen who, when told that the people had no bread, said, "Well, then let them eat cake." Such insensitivity is not overdrawn. We know the decadence and the indulgence of Czarist Russia before the Revolution and, if we marvel at the atrocities of the Communist era, then we need to remember the background of that reign of terror in Czarist Russia with its royalty and its luxury and its insensitivity to people.

My point is that that's the way that the world is. The world has always been marked by injustice, by inhumane conditions. There have been people who have suffered terribly and there have been those who have said, "Enough," and who have put their life on the line and who have acted boldly in order to change their world. I think Jesus was that way - of course, of quite another spirit than that criminal hanging with him, nonetheless, seeing that which was wrong and seeking to right it, to put his life on the line for the righting of the wrongs of the world.

I like to think of the criminal crucified with Jesus who joined the derision to the end as one who had a vision of the way things ought to be, as one whose soul was so seared with the human situation and its brokenness and its pain, that he grew barnacles and callouses on his soul until he became a person who, in the face of his own horrible death, continued mocking to the end, refusing to cave, refusing to grovel, refusing to beg for mercy.

I see something heroic in that. I see something attractive in that. As I said a moment ago, perhaps it's something of the rebel in me, but I like a person who is a rebel with a cause, who is willing to put his life there, and who is true to that to the end. Krister Stendahl, when he was here, made a statement that struck me, that it is a part of the dignity of the human person to be able to say "No" to God. Certainly in the biblical story, if the human person is taken seriously, created in the image of God, able to respond to God with the divine intention that that response be one of openness leading to the communion of Creator and creature, if God is serious and has done that seriously, then there is also the possibility, there must be the possibility of the human creature saying "No" to God. Krister Stendahl said it's a mark of the dignity of the human person that he or she can say "No" to God.

I like to think of that criminal as having been so seared in his soul by the wretchedness and the injustice of all that was wrong in the world that to the end he was a rebel. When Jesus said, "Father, forgive them," he said, "I don't want them forgiven. I want them damned!" That was his spirit; that was his soul. Can you identify with someone like that? Is it possible that in a human situation we can be driven to that kind of rebellion, that kind of fierce purpose to the end, damning the consequences? I think that is a part of our story, and I think if we don't own that in Church, we're just playing games. We so easily write off that man damned by his own rebellion, damned by his own derision, "Good. Damn him."

Mark Twain said one time, "If God did not want human beings to rebel, why did God create human beings in God's own image?" And in the Hebrew scriptures, there is enough ambiguity to make us wonder about that tree in the Garden of Eden - why did God put that tree of the knowledge of good and evil there? Certainly not for shade. He didn't need it for fruit. Well, traditionally, we've said the tree was put there so that God would test the human pair - would they follow the word of God and obey, or would they rebel? Well, there's another way to look at it. Might it be that the tree was there almost as an invitation to the human pair to take the initiative, to take responsibility for their lives and their world - to grow up, to mature into the knowledge of good and evil, to be like God?

Ah, the divine-human relationship is so complex. The Psalmist begins to sing a song of praise - "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. When I consider the heavens, the work of your fingers, the sun, the stars, the moon which you have created, then I say, 'Who is the human person that you

should be mindful of him or her?" The humility before the vastness of the cosmic sky, a sign of the smallness with which we can understand ourselves over against the one who said, "Let there be..."

But then he goes on to say, "You have made him lacking just a little of God." The King James Version was nervous about that because, you see, to put the human person that close to divinity can be a rather perilous thing, and so the King James Version, if you remember, says, "Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels." And the Jewish Publication Society in 1917 did the same thing. But then, the New English Bible moved it up a notch - "Thou hast made him a little less than god," with a small g, "A little less than a god." Finally, the Revised Standard Version and the Jewish Publication Society of 1985 put it in the way it really is in the Hebrew - "Thou hast made him to lack just a little of God."

So, what is this divine-human relationship? In a fascinating book by Richard Friedman, he talks about the hidden face of God and how from the beginning God is active and present and speaking and doing things, and then, as the story progresses, God seems to withdraw, to be present less and less. Maybe you've read *God, a Biography*, by Jack Miles. That was written on the basis of some of Friedman's ideas, the withdrawal of God and the balance of God and human changing over the centuries, with God withdrawing and the human taking a greater role, incrementally taking responsibility for this world, for this universe. That really is in the story itself. God, as it were, says, "Here it is. You run with it. Grow up. You're responsible for it." It's like the parent-child relationship, the adolescent who needs separation, who needs individuation from parent and yet, who needs the parent and longs for the presence and the blessing and affirmation of the parent. That tension between the parent and the child, the tension between God and the human - God makes us so that we can aspire to the divine and yet calls us to a subordinate role, which rests uneasily on our shoulders.

I think maybe the one who was dying, cursing still, was a mature human being, a rebel with a cause, and one who kept his integrity to the end. I like that. There is a certain integrity in saying "No," and there is a certain saccharine, sweet, sentimentality about a lot of Christian preaching and Christian piety, a lot of groveling, a lot of less than human, dehumanizing kind of groveling before an Almighty Something-or-Other, to which I wonder if God does not say, "Grow up and be my partner." I like the criminal who has probably never before gotten any good press in a Christian sermon. I like something about him, and I think maybe Jesus did, too. Jesus responded to the one who said, "Lord, remember me." And there's good place for that and we'll come there next week, but Jesus didn't respond to the taunts of the other. He said to the one, "Paradise tomorrow." And I would like to believe that the one who was taunting him on the other side was loved by Jesus just as much, because I like to think that Jesus knew how pained a human soul can be. I like to think that Jesus understands when one has been so hurt, so broken, that one simply will not, cannot yield and turn. I like to think that Jesus knows the depths of the possibility of the rebellion out of a broken

human existence and lets it be, because he knows that on the morrow he'll meet that one, too. And he knows that when that one comes into encounter with the love and mercy of God, that one will become a rebel without a cause.