

The Strength of Surrender

From the series: Faces Around the Cross

Text: Luke 23:42-43

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
March 2, 1997

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Luke paints a portrait for us of the crucifixion scene with the three crosses crowning the hill and the conversation between the crosses. Last week we considered the one criminal who died, still cursing, pouring derision on Jesus. I treated that particular person rather unconventionally for the Christian Church, and I did it intentionally because I believe it's so important for us to bring some imagination to the biblical text, to see if there are nuances, if there are deeper shadows that we've not glimpsed before, lest we be so familiar with the story that we come to church and we know how the sermon should end before we hear it. But, more than that, I said a good word for that dying criminal in order to address that which troubles me so often - the smugness of the Church.

How easy it is for us to write off, to damn those who seem so alienated, so other than we are. And I even said a positive word about the fact that there is a certain integrity in saying "No," part of human dignity, God taking us that seriously that if our "Yes" is real, our "No" is possible. There is a certain integrity in that one who would not break. But, I hope I was clear that this was no ordinary criminal. I suspect that this was one of those insurrectionists who rose up at the injustice, the inhumanity, the brutal and cruel world of which he was a part, who saw in that unjust society a foreign oppressor and a domestic aristocracy that collaborated for their own advantage. He saw people driven off their land, into abject poverty. There was so much that was wrong with his world and he rose up and sought to do something about it.

He was no ordinary criminal; Romans didn't crucify ordinary types. But, the hills outside of Jerusalem were set with crosses, thick with those who would dare question the coercive, violent life to which that people were subjected. And so, this one was one whose soul was so seared, who had been so crushed, finally rather than breaking before the threat to life, died, cursing the darkness. And I even suggested that such bitter cynicism and hatred that can grip the human soul could be broken only with an encounter with an unimaginable mercy and a love divine. That, I think, we can leave with the mercy of God, for I don't mean to say that it doesn't matter how we live. I don't think that anybody gets away with

anything. But, it is the deepest confession of my life that there is a mercy and a love in God, the God Whom Paul says was in Christ, absorbing the pain of the world. There is a mercy and a love in God that is able even to absorb the venom of a human spirit which has been hardened, embittered, and dies cursing the darkness. That encounter, then, at death, would be the moment of truth for such a one. For, what is the encounter with God at death? Isn't it the moment when perhaps for the first time we see truly, when we can see through? Is it not that moment when we see our lives in God's light? Is it not, then, for the first time that we can see the designs of mercy and the configurations of grace and the abyss of love unfiltered by all of the static of the human situation?

Can one still resist that light and love? C. S. Lewis, in his allegory, *The Great Divorce* – and it's only by way of allegory in myth and symbol that we can begin even to speak of these things – suggests that possibly one on the other side might linger in those gray, drab flatlands, refusing, resisting that bus ride into the center of light. Who knows? We ought not to know too much when it's beyond the limits of human knowing. I don't know. But this, again, I believe and this is at the center of my passion - if there is a final, absolute "No," it will not be God's "No."

It will be a "No" that we utter in the full light of amazing grace and unconditional love, and to say "No" in the face of such love and grace - that I cannot imagine.

Having said that, let me go on to say that to die cursing the darkness is a very great tragedy. To die with one's soul shriveled, encrusted is a human tragedy. There are those who move into that kind of experience and then, through time, move out and heal, thank God. There are some who live long in that embittered state. God be merciful to them. And there are some that have been so damaged and so hurt by Church or by society or by state or whatever, that, like the one on the cross, they die cursing the darkness. And that's a great tragedy, for such a person dies before they live, and as Luke portrays that crucifixion scene, as he paints his picture, he tells us that there is another possibility and it is the possibility that we see in the one on the other side of Jesus.

What happened to him? How do things like that happen? What kind of a breakthrough was it that in his last hour transformed his life, enabling him to live before he died? Was it watching the one in the center and the one on the other side? Was it watching his partner in crime cursing the darkness to his last breath in contrast to the one on the center cross praying for those who were crucifying him? Did the prayer, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," somehow or other break through his defenses? Did he see in his brother, dying full of hate, the stark contrast with Jesus, dying full of grace? And did he see it all in a moment?

What happens to one in such a moment? Well, we ought again not to try to do an anatomy, but I must say this - confronted with that cataclysmic contrast in spirit and attitude and ways of being and living and dying, this one on the other side was at a point of decision, for then it was for him to decide whether to stay the

course in the darkness or to surrender to the light that had broken upon him. If I would be faithful to this text and to my own human experience, I must say that if I affirm the belligerent one for the integrity of his "No," I must affirm the other for the strength of his surrender, for it takes courage to persist in the darkness and even more courage and strength to yield to the light, once it has been glimpsed, once it has dawned upon one.

That is the critical moment which will determine whether one dies before one lives, or whether one lives before one dies. There is strength in surrender, and it takes courage and strength to face one's whole life project and to say, "I am wrong. My motivation was right, my concern was right, but my method was wrong, my spirit was wrong, my heart was wrong, my soul is dying within me! God be merciful to me! Jesus, remember me."

There is an integrity in the "No" of the belligerent one. There is strength in the surrender of the yielding one, and don't fail to see it. It is a difference between heaven and hell. It is hell to die before one ever lives, lives in the wonder of the gift of life. It is hell to be imprisoned in the black hole of one's own bitterness, cynicism and hatred, even though God be merciful to such. I wish I sensed more compassion in the Church for those who have been so damaged that they cannot turn to the light. Oh, I see concern sometimes for the salvation of their soul, but what we ought really to be concerned about is the restoration of their humanity. God will take care of the rest. It is those two possibilities that Luke sets before us. There is a certain strength in surrender, and to surrender to grace is to begin to live before we die.