

Today...Paradise...

From the series: The Seven Last Words of Christ

Text: Luke 23:32-43

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

In the four Gospels there are seven utterances recorded from the cross. We call them the “Seven words from the cross.” They are not words that were taken down by a court reporter, as it were. They are, rather, windows through which we can see how the respective evangelists understood the meaning of the death of Jesus, how they interpreted the cross. Those words give us insight into their understanding in those decades following the death of Jesus when they tried to tell the story and make some sense of that crucifixion of the one whom they had called Lord and Messiah.

Luke records three words. The second we take up this morning. It has to do with the dialogue between Jesus and the criminal who was crucified with him. Luke tells us that there were two criminals crucified with Jesus: one on his right hand and one on his left. The two criminals were colleagues together in their revolutionary activity, but they are contrasted by Luke in the manner of their death in relationship to Jesus who hung between them. The one, angry, railing on Jesus, dying with a curse on his lips. The other, broken, overwhelmed by the grace of Jesus, asking for Jesus to remember him. The one dying in belligerence, the other dying in grace. Who were they, and what was going on in this drama on the cross?

Well, as a matter of fact, we don’t know. Nothing is told of these two men, not even a name. Although, wherever there’s a vacuum, pious imagination will fill in the blanks. So, one has been named, and legends by the legion have been told of these two, and how it happened that the one turned to Jesus in his dying hour. But all of that we know nothing of, really. What we do know, however, is that the time of Jesus was a time when there was a great revolutionary ferment in the air. That we know. The more they study and understand the historical situation, the social, the political, economic context in which Jesus lived and died, the more we understand that this was a time in which there was a ferment in the air. There was a widespread Messianic expectation, and there was an apocalyptic spirit abroad.

Apocalyptic is a word that means unveiling. And what people were looking for was that moment when God would unveil God's self and reveal his rule of righteousness, throwing down the evil and establishing the right. *Apocalyptic* is what people turn to when they get desperate in their human situation. A person who is caught up with apocalypticism is a person who has given up on history, has given up on human government, who has given up on human structures and systems, sees absolutely no hope, totally despairs, sees the human scene as futile and, therefore, cries to heaven that the heavens might be rent and God would come down and make things right. There were all kinds of forms of this, but we do know that this was operative because, in all of the four Gospels, the name Barabbas appears.

Barabbas was that insurrectionist, we are told, who was imprisoned and Pilate, in order to get Jesus off his back, having a sense that he really was a ploy and guilty of nothing, offered to the Jewish leaders the release of Barabbas or Jesus, hoping they would choose Jesus and he could be done with this Jesus affair. That story is in all four Gospels in various degrees, the idea that, at the festival of the Passover, this time of great ferment in the city of Jerusalem, a political prisoner would be released to the crowd. Matthew even calls Barabbas, Jesus Barabbas. Luke, not so, just Barabbas. Matthew makes it so pointed as to have Pilate say, "Will you have me release for you Jesus Barabbas or Jesus of Nazareth?" Of course, they cried, "Barabbas. Crucify Jesus." And so it goes.

Those who were crucified with Jesus were most likely insurrectionists, revolutionaries, perhaps a part of a guerilla band, dedicated to the overthrow of the occupying power. Now, they certainly knew the odds. But whenever a people are desperate enough, and this apocalyptic vision stirs them, and messianism is in the air, they take radical measures in order to change their situation, which is hopeless anyway. Whenever you see this happening in the human story you know that the massive peasant class is being pressed down below subsistence level. The world is a dangerous place whenever there are any people who have nothing to lose. And the peasant masses of Palestine under the occupying Roman power, with which the leadership of that people also collaborated and accommodated, were a seedbed of violent revolution. Jesus did not take that way. But Barabbas did. And very likely the two who hung, the one on his right hand and one on his left, were a part of some guerilla band.

We know from the historical sources of the time that there were any number of messianic pretenders at the time of Jesus. Jesus himself did not claim to be Messiah. He was acclaimed to be Messiah after his death by the Jesus movement. But there were any number of those at that time who did claim to be the Messiah, and they came to nothing. And there were those who led a band across the Jordan into the wilderness in order to duplicate the movement of ancient Israel when Joshua led them into the Promised Land, and in their duplicating that event, hoped that somehow or other God would move and some miraculous deliverance would come. This was what was in the air, and those who hung with

Jesus were probably caught up in that kind of revolutionary activity. And the one continued to his dying breath, full of anger, full of hate, full of curses, joining in with the soldiers and the leaders mocking Jesus, saying, “If you are king of the Jews. If you are the Messiah, save yourself and us.” There’s something rather heroic about that. This was a “rebel with a cause,” and he died. He went down in flames — for the cause to which he had committed his life. No whiner, no wimp. This one died! With his fist clenched!

Throughout the human story we can see this kind of thing. Remember the 60s? Some of you are too young. There was Martin Luther King with his non-aggression, his passive resistance. There was Malcolm X whose life has been brought to the screen a year ago and reminded us of one who looked at Martin Luther King and thought he was a wimp, who could bring a few folks to a lunch counter and maybe from the back of the bus, but wouldn’t really change the situation because the situation needed radical surgery — transformation — revolution! Malcolm X himself went through a transformation. But he would have been one before that, who would have been the railing criminal on the cross, deriding Jesus to his closing breath.

Time Magazine this week has Louis Farrakhan on its cover because one of his deputies recently at Keene College in New Jersey made a speech full of venom and hate over against the Jews, and because of this there is now a discussion in our own society about the Nation of Islam that Farrakhan heads, and the anti-Semitism which is becoming so obvious and belligerent in that group. That kind of rhetoric in our world is so terribly dangerous. It is the kind of rhetoric that puts fear in the hearts of people and causes people to do terrible things. A young man is on trial for his life down South because, shaped and formed by that kind of scare tactic and high decibel rhetoric, he pulls out a gun and shoots a doctor as he approaches an abortion clinic, claiming now that it was the literature and the rhetoric that brainwashed him, as it were, making him not responsible. Religious fundamentalism, such as we see in those settlers in the West Bank in Israel, living with that kind of righteous anger, causing a doctor to go into a mosque with a machine gun and massacre those worshipping there. And so we cannot speak strongly enough against that kind of hate-filled rhetoric, that venom and bile that spews from a heart symbolized by the clenched fist.

But as Michael Lehrner, editor of *Tickon*, a Jewish magazine, says,

“It is one thing for us with all of our righteous indignation to look at the Nation of Islam and a Farrakhan and to decry the venom and the hate, but it is another thing for us to ask the question, ‘What is it in the human story, what is it in the human situation that causes one to become so venomous, so hateful, so angry? What is it in the social fabric of the United States of America that causes Louis Farrakhan to be able to fill any hall, gathering thousands and thousands and thousands at any appearance? Is it not because he touches a raw nerve and speaks truth to them? Truth that

they have lived and experienced. It is not enough for us to decry the terrorist and to speak against violence. It is for us to say, 'Why?' and in that we are all in complicity."

The one, at his crucifixion, went to his death with clenched fist, cursing. And the other one? The other one rebukes his brother, acknowledges the justice of his own situation, and then unclenches his fist and with open hand reaches out to Jesus. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Broken. Suddenly, in a moment like that with not much time to live, changed, transformed.

Was it the prayer of Jesus? Certainly, Luke would point us to that. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." The grace of Jesus with which he lived and with which he was dying. Was it that grace? We are really only ever changed by a concrete encounter with grace, only when we experience grace in another. And then that grace washing over us — in a moment can transform us. "Jesus, remember me." And Jesus responded far beyond that humble request for he said, "Today you'll be with me in paradise."

What is it that makes one person go to his death full of anger and hate, cursing, with fist clenched all the way while another opens the hand and seeks grace? Frederick Beuchner has said, "With a clenched fist you can prevail, you can grow, you can bend, you can survive, but you cannot become human. For to become human it is only the outstretched hand, acknowledging one's dependency on grace that transforms." Why one this way and one that way? I don't know. I don't know.

That word from the cross today, "You will be with me in paradise." *Paradise*, a word borrowed from the Persian language meaning a walled garden. The Persian king would sometimes bestow the highest honor on his subject. He would make him or her the companion of the garden. This person could be the companion of the king in walking in the walled garden, reminding us, of course, of the creation story in the Garden of Eden, the Garden of Delight where the Lord God walked with those he had created in the cool of the day. Jesus said, "The walled garden, the Eden of Delight, in the presence of God will be yours. Not because somehow or other I am dying here for you but, as I die with you, you will come with me into the presence of Eternal Life, the God who dwells in light inaccessible." And not later, but today, here and now. For you see, when grace washes over one, then one does not wait until one's last breath in order to experience the embrace of the Light, but rather one begins to know heaven on earth, for this is life eternal to know God, to be embraced by that Light, to be a companion in the garden here and now so that as one moves toward death, whether that be eminent, as in the case of the criminal, or whether it be afar off it matters little. For death becomes simply that portal through which one moves from Light to Light, from Light to Life with Jesus into the presence of God.

Luke loves to set contrasts. He painted that portrait on Palm Sunday of Jesus weeping over the city saying, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, if only you knew the things that make for peace, but now they are hid from your eyes. You've missed God's moment." Now Luke gives us two ways to live and two ways to die. And he says, "God simply waits to grace and forgive, both the one and the other." And the choice we have is whether we will meet that grace now and extend the hand and make the plea and know heaven on earth as did the one criminal, or whether we will go raging into the night.

Martin Luther used this text as a wonderful statement against the use of the doctrine of purgatory. That was the burning issue, of course, in the 16th century. The Pope was raising St. Peter's and all of its glory on the basis of all the indulgences that were being sold, and if you had an extra hundred or two and you had a relative who had died and was, according to Catholic teaching, "in purgatorial fires," going through the process of purgation, then in that abusive system of the 16th century, a little money shortened the sentence. Why, Tetzel the traveling monk would say, "when you hear the coin fall in the coffer, the soul springs out of purgatory to God."

And Martin Luther wanted none of it. He could see what a manipulative, coercive thing this was. Unfortunately, in the Reformation the Church jettisoned that insight and wisdom of the ancient Church that, even at our death we have soul work to do. Think of it for a moment. One died with clenched fist, cursing and the other with opened hand, full of grace. But their histories were very much the same. Do you suppose that the moments that the one had yet to live would have been so transformative that their destinies would have been light and darkness? Or might it be that the Light that began to dawn on the one with open hand was a Light that the other met also, with a curse only half spoken, as his breath ran out? I suspect that, in the wisdom of the ancient Church, the whole idea of purgatory was the recognition that, for all of us as we move through our life and toward its terminus point, there is yet soul work to be done.

And I would like to think that there is no darkness for anyone except perhaps the one who has been embraced by the Light but who persists in saying, "Not thy will be done;" the Lord of Light might say then, "Thy will be done."

But other than that here are two ways to die. They really also represent two ways to live. The one is with clenched fist, a certain amount of strength . . . survival. But you can't be human that way. To be human is to open the hand and simply to say, "Jesus, remember me, for God's sake." Then you begin to live before you die. Thank God.