

Today You Will Be with Me



In his commentary on our scripture, William Barclay points out, “There

are...things of which we must say, ‘The time is past. I am grown too old now.’” At 31, I have noticed a few of these things. I’m too old to just sleep anywhere. I can still sleep on our couch, but a bed and most specifically, my bed is the real sweet spot. And this is a change. When I was in college, we went on choir tour and did home stays. I slept on a floor with just a pillow and a loose sheet, and it was okay. I would be too stiff to get away with that anymore. I’m too old to have a hair color that isn’t a naturally occurring color unless it’s for a really good reason. But fire-engine-red hair just for giggles probably isn’t going to happen. And that’s okay. I’m probably reaching the age where I’m too old to pierce something again. I wore earrings in high school and college. But an eyebrow ring probably won’t happen. But, as we’ll see today in scripture, maybe we should never say never.

Today we’re continuing our series on the seven statements Jesus makes from the cross. Last week, we talked about Jesus’ first words from the cross: “Father, forgive them” and considered what it means to be forgiven and our need to forgive. Today, we look to a story only told in Luke’s gospel about Jesus’ conversation with the thief on the cross.



So, I know I mentioned this last week if you were able to join us online,

BUT I think it’s important enough for us to grasp that it bears repeating.

It is a sheer miracle not only that Jesus’ words from the cross are recounted in some version by all four gospel writers but that he was able to speak at all. In his *Daily Bible Study* on the gospel of Luke, William Barclay vividly explains the process of crucifixion and its effect on the body: “The terror of crucifixion was this: the pain of the process was

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terrible but it was not enough to kill, and the victim was left to die of hunger and thirst beneath the blazing noontide sun and the frosts of night. Many a criminal was known to have hung for a week upon his cross until he died raving mad.” Not only was the pain of crucifixion searing through Jesus’ body; let’s not forget that he was beaten and flogged in Pilate’s court, which was not a usual part of the process of crucifixion. Add in the way his already beaten body was positioned on the cross, putting pressure on the diaphragm, choking off the air required to move through the vocal folds means that Jesus, every time, every excruciating time, would have had to push up on the nails in his hands to relieve enough of the pressure to croak out a few words. Seven times after being beaten, mocked, spat upon, and crucified, Jesus mustered the strength to speak.



And the second time he went through this pain was to respond to a

request from one of the men crucified with Jesus. While we exalt and

remember Jesus’ crucifixion because of all that it continues to mean to us, we cannot forget that crucifixion was the most popular means of capital punishment in the Roman world. Even though it was a common practice of the day, the placement of Jesus in between these two criminals is filled with a dramatic irony: the one who did no wrong alongside those who were receiving due punishment for their wrong doing. It was deliberately so staged to humiliate Jesus in front of the crowd and to rank him with robbers. Those responsible for Jesus’ death wanted the passing crowd and those who stood and spectated to think less of Jesus. To think he was damaged goods or none better than anybody else. A common criminal rather than the king of kings that others claimed him to be.

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The ironic thing is that by this point in Jesus' ministry, the leadership responsible for who gets crucified next to whom didn't need to do this.

The crowds and those who had been following Jesus already knew that Jesus ranked among the robbers. And that was Jesus' own doing! All throughout the gospels, Jesus ranked himself among the lowly and those that the world had otherwise written off. In life and ministry, Jesus associated with sinners. This troubled the religious people. In Luke 15:1-2 we read, "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" Jesus allowed the prostitute to wash his feet with her tears. He called tax collectors and garden-variety sinners to be his disciples. He touched lepers and ate with unclean people. One of my favorite stories in the entirety of the gospels, outside of the resurrection, is the story of Jesus and the woman at the well. It's an illustration of everything that Jesus was about in his ministry. Jesus, in the heat of the day, is having a conversation with a scandalous woman from Samaria. For those three words: scandalous, woman, and Samaritan, he shouldn't have been talking to this woman. But it's as if Jesus didn't care; he would have known, he just doesn't care. He has a conversation with her, hears her, and speaks words of salvation to her and through her to her village.



The amazing thing is that this is why Jesus came. This is why Jesus was

born. He announced to his disciples that his mission, his purpose, his goal was to seek and save those who were lost. And that doesn't change when the religious leadership of the day grumbles at him. It doesn't change when his own disciples rebuke him and roll their eyes. It doesn't change on the cross.

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In life and now in death, Jesus associated with sinners. In our scripture

today, we hear Jesus hearing the words of two people who could only be called “lost.” One of them is hurling insults towards him, joining the jeering crowd. The other is rising to Jesus’ defense telling him that the criminals are getting what they deserve, but the sinless savior is the one who deserves to be rescued. The penitent thief on the cross then makes a request of Jesus: “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And with love and pain and weight in his eyes, Jesus musters: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” Today you will be with me.

Jesus’ entire mission has been about seeking and saving the lost. This is along way to go to seek someone who was lost, but he’s provided an opportunity to do what he has done over and over and over again in his ministry: pronouncing saving. We see in Jesus’ dying words what we see throughout his life: He wanted to save. He came proclaiming a God of the second chance. This thief had faith the size of a mustard seed, and it was enough. The good news is that God shows the same great mercy to each of us. And the even better news is that it’s never too late for someone to turn to Jesus. It may be too late to sleep on the floor or have neon purple hair or a pierced septum. But it is never too late to open our hearts to an experience the grace of Jesus Christ.

Today is St. Patrick’s Day and he echoed this spirit in his life and ministry. Someone asked him why he bothered spending time with “those kinds of people,” ya know, like a thief on the cross. And his only response was to say, “Someone reached out to me when I was lost in my sin.” Who can you reach out to during this season of Lent?