

Remember Me

First Congregational Church, Branford

Luke 23:33-43; November 24, 2019

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I know the crucifixion of Jesus doesn't seem like a likely Thanksgiving scripture! The passage is scheduled in the lectionary because today is the last Sunday after Pentecost and it marks the end of the Christian liturgical year - it's also called the Reign of Christ Sunday. Traditionally, it's called Christ the King Sunday, and it was designated as such in 1925 by Pope Pious XI, to combat the secularism that was on the rise, by reminding people who truly should reign supreme in their lives - Jesus. So, you see, there've been other times that have seen a dip in religious commitment. I found a newspaper article in 1929 that said that 1 in 9 men goes to church. *At any time*, it's probably important to have a Reign of Christ Sunday - that we keep him first. Next Sunday marks the *beginning* of the Christian year with the First Sunday of Advent.

So, Luke tells the crucifixion like this:

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" ³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." ³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴²Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

The word of God for the people of God.

Maybe not such an odd reading for Thanksgiving Sunday, when you think of it. Is there anything to be more thankful for than Jesus' life, death, and resurrection? We wouldn't be here today if Jesus had chosen to deny who he was.

On this Reign of Christ Sunday, it took a savior king to do two things, both of which would lead to his death: Jesus was called to save the people from the deceitfulness that was occurring in the temple; and, he was called to save the people from the misuse and rigidity of scripture - scriptural law was being placed *before* people's needs - such as - "it is against the law to heal on the Sabbath" [if someone was hurting on the Sabbath, Jesus was going to heal them!] Jesus said people should come *before* the law. Compassion should reign. Religious leaders were appalled over his confrontation of them, and because Jesus wouldn't back down, they took him to the cross...

But, as we know, this is Victory Sunday This isn't Crucifixion Sunday! God had the *last* word, didn't he?? God took that cross and redeemed it. And, in doing so, God sent another message to believers everywhere - this resurrection is going to give light to those who sit in darkness - to those in pain, to those who carry their own cross. He says, *Remember Me* - Be still and know that I AM GOD... I AM the One who takes tragedy, I AM the One who takes injustice, and resurrects it. I have always been, and I will always be. Be still and know. I AM.

I hope that gives some hope for someone here today. *Hold on.* Be still.

Now, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, Satan had tempted Jesus to try a different, less demanding vocation... In today's scripture, it's been said that Satan comes again in the leaders, the soldiers, and one of the criminals, who taunt Jesus to save himself, to *avoid* the cross. Wouldn't that have made Satan just so happy?! You know, be a different sort of King from the one God called him to be... If you were a king you would retaliate, you would save yourself. But, that's not the kind of king he was, right? Jesus lived and died so that *others* may *fully* live. He laid his life down so that others could fully live - he did that for you and me. He died so that you could live in an honest house of worship, and scripture that placed compassion over the law. He died for these things - *for others*.

Friends, I was in conversation this week with someone who ascribes to scriptural law over compassion. Someone who told me I should preach this and that and tell you to do this and that!... While we're free to believe *whatever* we wish in the United Church of Christ, I can't help but feel that something's gone amiss in Christians who hold and hammer scriptural law over compassion.... Jesus died to free us from this very thing.

Anyway, let's look at *the other criminal*. He seems to understand that Jesus holds a power--no, *that he holds a love*, and in the face of that love, the criminal could only say, "I'm sorry for what I did - Jesus, remember me when you come

into your kingdom. Please don't forget about me. I made a mess of my life, and I'm sorry. Don't forget that I'm suffering. Don't forget that my family is hungry. Don't forget that I've lost my job. Don't forget that I'm living in a box for shelter. Don't forget that my child is in trouble. Don't forget that my child isn't going to have a chance in my country of origin. Remember her. Don't forget my friend whose in a nursing home. His insurance just ran out and they're kicking him out. Remember him. Don't forget that I'm suffering with a cancer drug. Don't forget that life is really hard for me right now. *Remember me, Jesus!* Remember me. Give me hope that there's something on the other side of this suffering. Bring light to my darkness! Show me that resurrection! Remember me."

And as for the other criminal hanging there... right, some people wouldn't like that I say this... but, o yes, it is *my* theology that our Fairest Lord Jesus, remembers him, too. How could he not?! I'm so thankful for a Messiah whose mercy is so wide, a Messiah who breaks down every single wall when he makes his earth shattering statement, *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*. Them. Them means all. It doesn't mean just the one who apologized, who said he was sorry. It meant the other one, too. It meant all.

Isn't it *t r e m e n d o u s* that Jesus's last words to a human being are an assurance of salvation? You are forgiven. You are forgiven. You are forgiven.

So... the hard part... I believe he comes up in here today to you and me and says, remember that forgiveness when someone has harmed *you*, and you're hanging on to hurt, resentment and anger that might just cause you to be miserable for the rest of your life. Give it up... forgive them. Forgive that sorry so and so.

But, listen, *I* know, *I* know that some things are easier to forgive than others, some people easier to forgive than others. I know that sometimes when you or a loved one are hurt, you can be nowhere near the place of forgiveness. But, I've thought about this, and there *is* something you can do on the road there. You *can* pray for the one or ones who did the hurting, you can surround them in love, joy, blessing. You may not be able to forgive right now. Just can't. So, move into praying for the sorry so and so's, and *Jesus* will remember them, Jesus will remember your loved one who was betrayed, Jesus will remember you. You don't have to forgive right now. Jesus will remember them and forgive. But, you do your part, and pray for the sorry so and so.

I've saved the *best* part for last. Jesus not only gave an assurance of forgiveness, he said *today you will be with me in paradise*. He *ends* his ministry by extending an *assurance of blessing*: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Beloved, you will be with him in Paradise. You're going to be with him there.

Even better news. Jesus emphasized the word Today. *Today*, I will do this. *Today*, I will assure you. *Today*, you will be with me in Paradise. Truly, beloved, I tell you, if you believe in him, you are in Paradise right now. Today.

In closing, I know that some American families won't be sharing a thanksgiving meal together due to ill will between them. Jesus, remember these families. And, as all of *us* eat our thanksgiving meal, let us *remember him*. Amen.

Hymns **Today**: *We Gather Together, Fairest Lord Jesus, Crown Him with Many Crowns, Now Thank We All Our God*