

“Save Yourself!”

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³³When 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.” (Luke 23:33-43)

According to Gospel of Luke, Jesus was invited to save himself twice: once at the very beginning of his earthly ministry, and a second time at the very end. The first took place immediately after his baptism by John, when Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit out into the wilderness. For forty days he was weakened by hunger and tempted by the devil. In the last of these temptations, the devil carried Jesus to Jerusalem and set him precariously on the pinnacle of the temple. A fall from that height would surely have been fatal. *“If you [really] are the Son of God,”* the devil said, then *“throw yourself down from here.”* In a mocking tone, the devil continued, *“After all... isn’t it written that “[God] will command his angels concerning you, to guard you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up?’”* In this case, Jesus refused to take advantage of his position or put God to the test. Right from the beginning, Jesus refused to act solely to save himself.

And now, in the passage we read today, it happens again at the very end of his life. Jesus was on the cross and his final breaths were drawing near. He is being executed along with two other men described in the gospels as “robbers,” “bandits,” or “thieves.” In Matthew’s gospel, the two thieves join with the gathered crowd in mocking Jesus. “He trusts in God,” they sneer. “Let God rescue him now if he wants him.”

But Luke describes the scene with additional detail – detail that describes what is happening in a much more intimate and personal way. Even as the crowd below cruelly taunts him with cries of *“Save yourself,”* Jesus utters his famously merciful prayer, *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”*

And then the frame of the scene narrows to focus completely on the three crucified men. In Luke’s gospel, the temptation and taunt is lifted up onto the crosses and spoken directly to Christ’s face. *“You’re supposed to be the Messiah, right?”* says one of the two criminals. *“Save yourself! And while you’re at it, save us!”*

But the other thief rebukes his mocking peer. “Do you not fear God?” he says. “Don’t you realize that we are getting what we deserve, but this man has done nothing wrong!”



He then turns to speak to Jesus. Face to face and eye to eye with the Messiah, the second thief recognizes that this is the most critical moment of his life. And on a dark, rocky hill where no one had spoken to Christ with any humanity or compassion, the second thief addresses Christ by name. *“Jesus,”* he says, *“remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*

In these moments, instead of invoking the power of heaven and the angels to save himself, Jesus focuses instead on the painful plight of another. *“Truly I tell you,”* Jesus tells the man, *“today you will be with me in Paradise.”*

There’s a great quote from the TV series *“Ted Lasso”* from an episode in which various characters are struggling to overcome mistakes in their past, either trying to forgive themselves or another person. Coach Lasso, always a fount of practical wisdom, says *“I hope that either all of us, or none of us, are judged by the actions of our weakest moments...”*¹ It is a variation of something I have heard repeatedly from people in our presbytery who minister to incarcerated persons in state prisons. None of us want to be judged by our worst mistakes, but that is what often happens to people convicted of crimes. They are permanently labeled by one bad decision, or one bad day.

That, however, is not the fate of the humble criminal crucified next to Jesus. We don’t know his name. We don’t know his crime. But history has remembered him simple as *“the penitent thief.”* His is remembered as the one who repented in humility and faith. He is not remembered for his worst moment, but for his best moment, when the very best of him shone through in humility, faith, and hope. And while we are not told whether his cross was to the right or to the left of Jesus, tradition has assumed that he was on the right hand of Jesus – the coveted place of honor and favor at any royal banquet... the place that Jesus’ own disciples had coveted and argued over.

When Luke focuses in on this very personal conversation between three crucified men, the evangelist draws each of us into that moment in a very personal way. The two thieves on either side of Christ represent the two sides that live in each of us – two sides that are always in conflict. The penitent thief represents that part of us that regrets the sin in our life... the part that is concerned about the needs and feelings of other people... the part that feels ashamed when we hurt another person or dishonor God in some way. This is the side that can be humble, the side that can recognize when we have erred, the side that is willing and able to say we are sorry.

The impenitent thief represents the opposite of all things. This is the part of us that is always looking out for ourselves... the part that is selfish, greedy, always clawing for an advantage... the part that doesn’t want to take responsibility or feel ashamed or say we are sorry. This part of us is not interested in accountability or responsibility. Self-interest and self-preservation is its only goal. If given the chance, this side would choose to save itself every single time.

The conversation these two thieves had with Christ is the same internal conversation we have with ourselves every day. At least that is what John Knox would say. I know I have been talking a lot about Knox since we came back from our Scotland pilgrimage, but he really gets to the heart of some pretty significant realities. And he, along with other Reformers, had some pretty pointed ideas about our desire, and our capacity, to save ourselves.

¹ *“Mom City,” Ted Lasso Season 3, Episode 11.*

In a nutshell, Knox believed that fallible human beings, broken as we are by the scourge of sin, are incapable of doing anything purely good or righteous. If we accomplish something good, he said, it is really the Spirit of Christ living in us, who actually accomplishes that good. This goodness of Christ in us is perpetually contending against the sin in us. In the Scots Confession, which is part of our theological heritage, Knox says it this way: “Thence comes that continual battle which is between the flesh and the Spirit in God’s children, while the flesh and the natural man, being corrupt, lust for things pleasant and delightful to themselves, are envious in adversity and proud in prosperity, and every moment prone and ready to offend the majesty of God. But the Spirit of God, who bears witness to our spirit that we are the sons of God, makes us resist filthy pleasures and groan in God’s presence for deliverance from this bondage of corruption, and finally to triumph over sin so that it does not reign in our mortal bodies.”²

In other words, we are at war with ourselves. We are split in half, and the two sides within us are struggling for control. Standing in the breach between them is Christ. One side taunts Christ, dismisses Christ, doubts that Christ really has any power to help us. The other side is humble and wise enough to recognize that any hope we may have of saving ourselves is a fantasy. It is able to confess that any lasting good that may come will not be the result of our own work, or wits, or perseverance, or conscience.

Who will win this battle? It is up to Christ, the man in the middle. There will probably always be a part of us that wants to believe we can save ourselves, but the witness of the ages shows that we simply cannot. So, thanks be to God that the Holy One who, in the wilderness at the beginning, on the cross at the end, opted not to save his own self, but to save others... to save us. Thank goodness that we rely on the love and grace of a God who refuses to judge us by the actions of our weakest moments.

The truth of the matter is that we are all robbers, bandits, and thieves. The real question is, will we be choose to be penitent ones? How do we wish to be remembered? ***Amen.***

² *The Scots Confession*, Chapter XIII.