

Between the Two of Us

by

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November 24

Luke 23:33-43

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."

I.

Our text seems to give us an ironic picture of Jesus, that is, he who came to love the world was in the end scorned by the world. By religious leaders, by soldiers, and by erstwhile followers who merely watched silently as he was mocked and humiliated. Luke brings into focus the ironic thing that the one who came to love the world was held in scorn by the world. But the point of Luke is never purely ironic. Luke reserves the majority of the text to the two criminals who die with Jesus. They speak. One speaks sarcastically: Save yourself and us, if you can!

The other, living his last day, speaks more reflectively: We made our own decisions, and this is the consequence of those decisions. We deserved what we got. But this person, he's done nothing wrong.

Luke depicts two persons, one whose reaction to Jesus is biting and sarcastic and the other whose response is open to Jesus as he is in himself, Christ the King. The question the text seems to hold up to us is which power rules in our hearts, the cross or the one who rules from the cross.

II.

It's a relevant question for us, because it seems like scorn and sarcasm rules in us, collectively and personally. We are an angry nation. If you read the comment fields in online journalism, you don't have any doubt. There's also anger, scorn, sarcasm in our Facebook posts, which is a bit like an anger-o-meter.

A fair level of outrage seems to have been reserved for public figures. Who are they? Well, our current president is one. He thinks he's a victim of some terrible mob action. But an impeachment process is a legal proceeding. It's the civilized alternative to the way other monarchs have been removed from the throne. But when a midlevel woman politician in the UK decides she can't take the hate anymore, drops out of public life because of the threats against her family, the ugliness, you know we've reached a threshold moment. She dreads opening her email because she knows the torrent of scorn that will fill her screen and find its way into her heart and possibly even her home.

Members of the press have become public figures, which for most journalists is a strange thing; journalists typically don't want to *be* the story; they want to *tell* the story. Entire people groups lumped together as rapists, or gang members, or scum. It's normative. People get crucified all the time and it excites all of us, gets the partisan blood flowing, almost making us feel that crucifixion itself is necessary.

Meanwhile, our own planet hurts with neglect. Our democracy is in trouble. And good people live and work under constant threat. And it's scary to feel as helpless as the hurt person feels, the hurt creature. Collectively, without intervention, the hurt creature turns its hurt into self-devouring hostility.

III.

Maybe that's why Luke connects these two scenes, the big picture of religious leaders and political actors mocking Jesus, so-called good people watching (and saying nothing) and this unusually intimate conversation between Jesus and the two people crucified on either side of him.

It's as if Luke imagines this is the MRI of the public body in pain. And this Lukan MRI shows that we are a torn creature, especially when we're human in community. Maybe we've got a little bit of the unrepentant criminal and the repentant criminal in each of us. It's not just one or the other. Some days, we lash out at God, and say, God, if you are who you say you are, get us out of this mess. We're so full of hostility and anger, we don't even complain that we too are being crucified. It's all the same to us!

Or, on another day, we take stock, and we say, I've made the decisions I've made. These led to certain consequences. It may not be fair, it may not be just, but the outcome is predictable, even if

it's not right. Maybe that's what it feels like when the cross is king rather than Christ, our healer and forgiveness.

Jesus lives and dies between the twin personalities of the unrepentant and the repentant, the reflective and the reflexive, between the scorn and the cry for help.

Unlike us, Jesus is not torn the way we are. His heart, aches and is torn for us, as mother is torn for her children. But what is key is that identity of being God for us, is consistent. Jesus doesn't suddenly become forgiving, full of tenderness at the end of this life. He came to heal the sick, save the lost, and rescue sinners from sin. Like the God in whose name he comes, he is consistent, even to his death on the cross. The cross doesn't rule Christ; Christ rules in spite of the cross, undermining its authority at every turn.

In this regard, you might notice that Jesus doesn't call his disciples to riot, doesn't excoriate Roman soldiers, doesn't berate religious leaders. It's not that he wasn't capable of delivering rebuke. But it's almost as if he claims what is authoritative, what is lasting, what is healing. Instead of a crown of hostility, Jesus wears instead the crown of tender-heartedness. Jesus says, "Forgive them Lord for they do not know what they do."

Some scholars doubt this prayer because it's awkward where it is, situated between a description of the crowd and Jesus' interactions with the two criminals. They point out that this prayer is almost identical to a prayer that Stephen prays in the Book of Acts, and that it in fact, shows up several times there. But maybe that's the point: this prayer, captures the whole purpose of Jesus' life and therefore our lives. Pray with tenderness. Pray with persistence. Pray with forgiveness, for those who hurt us don't know what they are doing.

There's a note of grace in that prayer, for everyone. The soldiers. The religious leaders. The crowds who watch and therefore acquiesce by their passivity. And for those who vocalize scorn. And in a sense, we see the power of that prayer being answered in this other crucified person. Maybe, in a sense, we see and hear God's prayer of forgiveness forming in the trust of the crucified person who says, My end has come and I know not how day will break, but I know with whom my new dawn will come.

Today, Jesus says, you will be with me in paradise. Indeed, Jesus makes two statements: *Forgive them for they know not what they do* and *Today you will be with me in paradise*. Where judgement might have ruled, forgiveness opened up learning as a possibility; where crucifixion seemed to end debate, Jesus underlines God's ultimate rule. There may be a cross, but there is a king, a true king . . . and some were there who saw and believed.

It's almost as if in that moment, we see the crucified and crucifying world interrupted, turned on its head. How amazing is that, that the very tool of divisiveness, the very instrument of pain, could be so subverted, so drained of its power, that healing rather than hurt, promise rather than divide was its lasting witness?

IV.

You may not know this, but Ashland Café on York Road is the site for the healing of our nation. About once a month, I get together with Haswell Franklin Sr. for lunch. Haswell, who sits in the front pew, keeps a file with my name on it. That makes me a little nervous. He brings it with him every time we meet. Usually, it includes areas where we don't agree. But this is not a crucifixion. Instead, it's time for conversation. Our nation, our place in it, is deeply torn. Haswell and I are part of that. He likes Sean Hannity. I'm a Rachel Maddow fan. He believes in trickle-down economics; I believe in redistribution; he thinks the world is in a much better place than it was in previous centuries; I think we face challenges of historic scope. We talk about all these things. Sometimes we just don't agree. Occasionally, surprisingly, we find agreement. Other times, we may not agree, but we find ourselves meeting in a place that feels kind of vulnerable.

After we had finished our lunch this past Friday, he read a piece on undocumented immigrants, and the gist of it was that the country would be financially better off if undocumented people were removed from the country. He finished the article. And I said, "I don't know about that. But I did know a person named Gabriela when she was a teen." And in a disjointed way, I shared about Gabriela.

She came across the border as an infant, carried by her parents, Manuel and Gabriela, after whom she's named. Her parents fled poverty. They weren't experiencing persecution. They never sought asylum. They wanted a decent future for their children, shoes, schools, opportunities. She had a younger brother and sister who were born in the US and thus citizens. Teenage Gabriela had registered as a DREAMER, an Obama era effort to fix a very broken system of immigration. Of course, now the status of the DREAMERS is in question.

When she was accepted to a top-tier university in Chicago, she was denied Federal student loans as well as scholarships that might have been available to underrepresented student populations, because of her legal status.

With Gabriella on the phone, I spoke to the admissions officer. The admission's officer was encouraging her to take on hundreds of thousands of dollars of privately held debt in order to pursue her dreams. To pursue her dreams, she would have to crucify her future. Some kind of dream. Gabriela sometimes watched our children when Rebecca and I needed a night out. Gabriela had a non-Hispanic boyfriend at the local high school. When she graduated from high school, her family invited us to celebrate at Eagle Point, a city park in Dubuque, where the American flag flew proudly.

And then I stopped.

Haswell paused, too. Well, he said, it's about pros and cons, striking a balance. True. And I think I know the tenderness of a man's heart when I see it. I don't pretend that we resolved our differences on immigration. But there's good news. Haswell has a list of things in his file that we have yet to cover. A lunch date is in our future.

Maybe Ashland Café isn't paradise. But it might be going in the right direction with Christ between the two of us. Amen.