

The Other Criminals

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. Today's reading is from Luke chapter 23, verses 32 through 43. Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed.

When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals, one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.

And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, He saved others. Let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One.

The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself. There was a written notice above him which read, This is the king of the Jews.

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him. Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us. But the other criminal rebuked him.

[1 : 1 6] Don't you fear God, he said. Since you are under the same sentence, we are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.

Then he said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Jesus answered him, Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. So let's pray together. Loving and gracious God, we give you thanks for the gift that is this morning. We thank you that you have moved among us so powerfully today.

And with our hearts open, Lord, we ask that you would plant a seed in each of us that will grow and bear fruit for the honor and the glory of your name. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray. Amen.

Amen. So before we get started today, I wanted to share that we're going to see some images of the crucifixion today. So if that may be difficult for you or for the folk who are with you, I just wanted to give everybody a little warning on that so you can take care of yourselves as we come to it.

[2 : 2 6] Now, week two of Lent. We are on the second Sunday in Lent. And we're focused on this idea of dealing with the other two men crucified with Christ.

But we don't often think of them as kind of important to the story. But what happens to them does have a really powerful lesson for us.

And I hope that we will be able to excavate that today as it helps you in your walk in faith. So let me ask you something that I alluded to in the greeting.

Have you ever felt pretty far away from home? I mean, there's times we've all probably been away from home. But have you ever felt really far away from home?

Like, how far have you ever gone? For me, that answer is 9,689 miles. I was blessed to be able to travel to Sydney for something a while ago.

[3 : 33] And that's pretty far distance from home. Now, the thing about it that stood out when I got there, it was a long and crazy time of travel. It took 32 hours of travel time.

Now, when I get there, like sane people, I called my wife. Okay? And, but what stood out to me about getting there was, I don't know what I was expecting, but when we spoke, it was like we were speaking anywhere.

You know, like I could have been in my office, could have been anywhere in the U.S. And even with that huge time difference and huge amount of physical distance, it was just like we were on the phone any other time.

Now, the reason why I bring that up is because distance is this tricky thing. We know that there's an actual distance between you and another person or you and another point.

For example, for me, my youngest daughter goes to Niagara University. From this church to that dorm room is 14 miles. Now, there are days when I've had to run over there when that 14 miles felt like nothing.

[4 : 41] There are also days when it felt like it was taking an eternity because we were running late for something. There were days when it felt like it would just drag and drag and drag. And even though the whole trip only takes 15, 20 minutes, it still felt like it was taking forever even though it's the exact same distance.

And that's what I want you to consider is this idea that distance, even though on a certain level it's the same and fixed, it can feel really different at times.

So again, let me ask you a question you heard me ask before. How far away have you ever felt from Jesus? Because that, friends, isn't about so much your physical distance as it is about something else.

It doesn't take a lot to feel far from Jesus. And what's even weirder about that is you can feel relatively close to Jesus, meaning that you come to church every Sunday, you do the things, but you can actually be pretty far away from Jesus.

And that's what we got to deal with today. How do we make sure that we understand where we are? You know, even as we look at our image for the series, you see those crosses.

[6 : 11] And in most pictures of the crucifixion, you see those three crosses, and they don't feel very far apart, right? Now, we have no way of knowing how actually far apart those two men were from Jesus.

But they seem to be pretty close. But when you listen to the two men talk, they can also seem very far away from him.

Now, these two guys, we don't know much about them. We don't know why they're being crucified. Tradition has given them names, although most Protestant traditions don't honor those names because they came from a source that has a lot of refuted information in it.

So as we deal with who they are, their names have kind of stuck with us by what they did. One is called sometimes the bad thief.

The other sometimes is called the penitent thief, or the repentant thief, or the good thief. But it goes a little deeper than that.

[7 : 17] And I want you to think about exactly what we're saying in terms of good and bad and far away. Because when you see this, you'll see that they're not that far.

But in some ways, they're extremely far. Adrian? If you're what you say you are, if you're the Messiah, why don't you save yourself?

Hmm? And not.

Leave him alone! Don't you fear God, even when you are dying? We deserve to die.

For we are receiving the just punishment for our crimes. Jesus. Jesus. But this man has done nothing wrong.

[8 : 51] Jesus. Jesus. Remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. He will be with me in paradise. Today. He will be with me in paradise.

Amen? Yes. Amen. Thank you, Lord. So you've heard the story. it was read for you and now you've seen it played out how far away do you think he feels from Jesus not how far is he from Jesus but how far do you think he feels from Jesus I mean he's done something terrible something terrible enough to get him crucified and he cries out to Jesus if you are who you say you are then save yourself and us it's interesting because even in that little bit of distance still seems pretty far away here's why he seems so far away from Jesus because he wants what Jesus can do but he doesn't seem to want anything to do with Jesus and that is an interesting place to land it's an interesting place to land but it's a very familiar place in which many people will find themselves because there's a lot of folks who want what Jesus can do for them but they actually don't want anything to do with Jesus in other words in other words save me help me heal me fix me let me into heaven but don't actually relate to me don't want anything from me some of us may have prayed those kind of prayers ourselves and that is a challenge because it's interesting these two clearly know something about Jesus they probably heard the different things being hurled at him and insulting him who knows if they had witnessed some of the things he had done or heard some of his teaching or his lessons so it's fascinating that we can believe in Jesus' power and certainly want what Jesus can do but not want him then we have our other guy how far away from Jesus do you think he feels when the story starts he feels kind of far away he acknowledges that he's done terrible things he acknowledges that he's fallen short that he's not walked the path that Jesus talks about and there in that moment as close physically as they may be he still feels miles and miles away and yet there's still something inside him something inside him that clicks for him but doesn't click for the other one says maybe he can still reach me not physically reach me but reach me even though

I have done these things even though my heart may be in this other place maybe he can still reach me so he reaches out he reaches out and asks he doesn't even really ask even though you know he's pleading he's begging basically remember me interesting cry remember me because we tend to think that it's complicated right we use fancy words like repent he just says Jesus remember me it's interesting because this moment challenges us a little bit as church people sometimes because this guy doesn't jump through all the hoops that we tend to set up he just simply asks Jesus to remember me and what's so powerful about this moment is that

Jesus does that Jesus sees him Jesus acknowledges him and Jesus promises him the very thing that many folks reach out to Jesus for they strive for it they work for it they do all kinds of stuff to hope to hear it but this man in his broken heartedness simply says remember me he actually does something else that's kind of fascinating now those of you in Bible study know the answer to this question but what's really interesting about this is that he's one of the only people who actually acknowledges Jesus as a king because he says remember me when you come into your kingdom that implies there is a kingdom and Jesus is the king of it there's really only one other time that you could even bring up that's close to it most every other interaction nobody else believes him when he talks to Pontius Pilate

[15 : 42] Pilate doesn't believe it but here what we see is this genuine heart open up knowing that he needs what only Jesus can give him and that friends is the point of the lesson how far away do you feel because if you feel far away at all let this story show you that you are never too far from him that his love can reach you wherever you find yourself physically or spiritually that our Jesus the one that we've encountered will look at you and be able to say today you will be with me but can you do what he did that's the question can you be bold enough can you be humble enough can you be courageous enough to simply ask because that's what holds up so many of us something gets inside of us where we start to think that well maybe I don't need this one maybe I'm okay maybe I'll be fine as I am even though just like you heard him say

I know I've done terrible things but can you let your heart get to a place where you realize that only he can do what I really need because if you can't do that you're gonna stay stuck and don't fall into the trap of the other one wanting the thing without realizing it comes with the man because that happens where folks are looking for salvation but realizing that salvation only comes with and through him so just ask simply ask not me not us him that's the key what may have gotten into your head that made you think you are too far from

Jesus that thing that you may have done whether it was today or whether it was a million years ago that has you thinking that this is simply too much God can't realize this God can't forgive this and therefore I'm out there's just this bridge that can't be built between me and Jesus the chasm is too wide and too far friends if you are in that place let me assure you that there is no thing that the blood of Jesus cannot cover there is no sin that the cross of Jesus is not sufficient to address none but you have to believe that you have to believe it enough to open your heart and ask but if you let it get into your head that nope

Jesus blood can't fix this that's not a God problem that's a you problem you have to fix that so simply ask and let what happens to him be your guide you may not see skies open you may not feel some thunderous miracle take place in your soul it may not be that all of a sudden you hear heavenly choirs sing you may just simply know in your heart of hearts simply and clearly just as you heard him tell the thief today you will be with me that's all but friends that may be all but what else is there what else do you need what else would you want do you need the production do you need the magic show or can the word of Jesus suffice because that's how this works

God's grace is not only enough God's grace is immediate it is here now just ready for you to receive so remember whatever it is you are carrying whatever it is you think is keeping you from him no matter how far away you feel remember what Jesus has said to you he said it even in this moment where he is dying and in such utter agony what does Jesus speak over us even in this moment father forgive them today you will be with me in paradise and most importantly that thing that you think can't be done that unforgivable thing I would never speak aloud what Jesus says to you is it is accomplished that bridge you thought couldn't be built he's built it that chasm you thought he couldn't cover he's covered it that sin that you thought couldn't be forgiven his life has forgiven it receive that receive that and then go into the world and bear witness to that

[23 : 03] Jesus not the one that people are talking about in all these different crazy ways and in these different places but the one who has simply forgiven loved freed and saved you amen and amen almighty and gracious God we thank you for the truth that you have forgiven freed and saved us that you wanted us so badly that you were willing to endure even this that no matter what we've done no matter where we go you can reach us that you have covered us that you have freed us let our hearts know that enough to be able to ask that you would remember let us simply hear that reassurance let us know it from the bottom of our hearts to the very foot bottom of our feet with all we are

Lord we have seen the power of your grace we have known the depths of your love let us testify as witnesses to who you are to a world that does not understand to a world that does not know to a world that needs what only you can give we are your witnesses may it be so amen last line of that hymn lands so powerfully that his wounds have paid our ransom and when we consider the ways in which we bear witness to who Jesus is by our lives over how we live this coming week a couple things we want to highlight for you as you consider how you bear witness to your faith first is our Easter flowers are the deadline to order them is today so if you want to order please make sure you get that order in and are able to fill out the little card so we know who's ordering and who isn't and for our

Easter celebration which is always a great fun time for everyone I'm gonna let our little helpers ask you for your help hi everyone we will be having our Easter celebration and a come we need lots of volunteers to help we need help with bleeding story stations helping with crash leading games helping with prize tables being a starter for the egg camp greeting families and working the hot in addition to volunteering we need many donations to make this event helpful we need candy to go inside all of the eggs why is it for a prize table we want to make sure everyone can go home what a crime we also need hot dogs rolls drinks and chips for our hot dog lunch we need everyone to sign up to help make this event successful for our community we couldn't do this without your donations and help you can sign up on the clipboards that will be best during the service or on the clipboard in the back of the sanctuary thank you for all your help we can say to the land now I don't know how grinchy you would have to be to say no to that so figure out what piece you can contribute and contribute that piece okay and so moving on from the

Easter pieces want to talk fish fry for a quick minute we sold 561 and the main thing we want to pay attention to is twofold we use a couple areas where we need help we're still looking for help with the pie cart we're also still looking for help with the cleanup crew the main thing though I want to highlight is that we were perilously close to dessert red alert again this week okay now as somebody who eats a lot of the dessert at the fish fry I want to make sure this appeal is made so if you are able to contribute to the desserts please do this is two weeks in a row we've cut it pretty close so if you can't contribute to that make sure that you do sign up if you haven't and here's the thing and this will be my final comment for announcements is that sometimes folks just show up without signing up as glad as we are to have you there with your hands the hard part is it's difficult to manage the whole ministry if we think we have a crisis and we don't okay so please just let us know what's going on by signing up and letting us know that you'll be there all that having been said let's receive our benediction lord we are grateful that your grace covers us in all the ways we cannot even fathom because we feel so far away at times but we know that you are more than enough that you have indeed paid the ransom and now in the name of god our king and creator in the name of jesus christ our lord and our redeemer and in the name of the holy spirit our comforter and our sustainer may god bless us now as we leave to love and serve god and all god's children and all god's people said amen you