

This coming Wednesday, March 20, is going to be the first day of spring. This is a day that has been long awaited through such a long winter of bad weather and rain. I found it ironic during our last snow storm when I was playing outside with Dean, I looked at a snow-covered tree with the buds piercing through the snow. New life was trying to spring forth, even in the cold of winter.

Christ is always offering us new life, but so often we miss the signs of new life all around us. I think this is why I love the season of Spring, because we look all around at the beauty of creation and see new life bursting forth. As we continue our “Final Words From the Cross” sermon series today we see Jesus Christ offering new life to a criminal who was hanging beside him on the cross.

Our Scripture for today from Luke 23:42-43 reads: “Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ He replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’” We see in the last moments of his life a criminal reached out to Jesus, and Jesus in God’s mercy invited him into paradise.

In our Disciple Bible Study each week we have been studying the Old Testament and the richness of Scripture therein. The Old Testament is important because it helps us make the connection between God’s covenant people. In his book “Final Words from the Cross” Adam Hamilton reminds us that the words spoken by the criminal “remember me” are the words that have been spoken by the people of God for thousands of years.ⁱ This phrase “remember me” did not just mean don’t forget me, it meant “help me and deliver me.”ⁱⁱ

So many people of God uttered these same words to God in the Old Testament. Hamilton recounts these stories: “God remembered Noah and saved him from the flood...God remembered his covenant with Abraham and therefore delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.”ⁱⁱⁱ God’s act of remembering saves the people of God, and here we see the criminal on the cross call upon God’s saving grace.

We too have cried out these same words to God: “Father, remember me.” We want to be remembered, we want to be saved, we do not want to feel as if we have been forgotten. We also are called to participate in God’s ministry of remembering and honoring each person as a child of God.

In the various nursing homes and hospitals, I have visited over my ministry, I have noticed that the most hurtful thing that people who are homebound or in a nursing home experience is being forgotten. We participate in this ministry of remembering when we acknowledge the people that God has placed in our lives.

We hear this criminal's plea to be remembered and it does something to us. We may jump to judgement and think but wait...he doesn't deserve to be forgiven or participate in Christ's paradise. I mean, this person was a criminal and the Greek word to describe him in the Bible leads us to believe that he was not a petty thief, but he participated in acts of violence to get the possessions he was after.^{iv}

He was the worst kind of criminal who dehumanized other people to get what he wanted. We may also jump to judgment when reading the parable in Matthew 20, of the laborers in the vineyard who are all paid the same for a day's work, even though some workers did not arrive until the day was almost over. In our moral compass these actions may feel unfair to us. We may relate to the workers who were in the vineyard all day, or the disciples who gave up everything to follow Jesus, we may feel like the older brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son.

We may think to ourselves, but I am the one who has been here God, why do "these people" who have squandered their whole lives with sin also get to obtain salvation? And the answer is simple...**salvation is available to all through their faith in Jesus Christ.**

Romans 10: 9 tells us "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." John Wesley, the founder of our denomination said it a different way. In his sermon "Free Grace" Wesley said, "How freely does God love the world! While we were yet sinners, 'Christ died for the ungodly.' While we were 'dead in our sin,' God 'spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all.' And how freely with him does he 'give us all things!' Verily, FREE GRACE is all in all! The grace or love of God, whence cometh our salvation, is FREE IN ALL, and FREE FOR ALL."^v

God's salvation and grace is available to all who believe that Jesus Christ is Lord. We can all obtain salvation, like the criminal, but before we do, we have to acknowledge that we are sinners in need of God's redeeming grace. We are ALL sinners. This is what the season of Lent is all about, we have to recognize that although we may not have the same criminal history as the armed robber on the cross, that it was also our sins that put Jesus on there.

We have to acknowledge that although we may not have a rap sheet, that we are imperfect, that we all struggle to do the things that God has called us to do, that we have been thieves of our own joy or the joy of others. That we too have committed crimes against God by our inability to put God first.

Jesus responds to the criminal’s request by saying, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”^{vi} Hamilton points out there are several important things that happen in these words of Jesus. First, Jesus starts his response with the word “today,” this bring us comfort because this means, even though we don’t understand how this happens, that in the moment of our death through our faith in Jesus Christ, we will be with God.^{vii}

Throughout my ministry, I have witnessed a thin veil with those who are about to pass away. I have had the blessing of being with these people at the end of their lives when they have one foot on earth and one foot in heaven. It is amazing to me that time and time again these people at the end of their lives will sit up and look straight forward as if they are seeing something that I cannot. Some will even say they recognize people in the room who have already passed on.

These experiences have brought me comfort and reinforce Jesus’ words to the criminal of “today.” Jesus’ words also can take away our fear of death. Just as Psalm 27:1 stated today: “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life’ of whom shall I be afraid?”

The good news for our lives today is that through our faith we are not separated from God for a moment. This does bring us immense comfort. Even though we may fear physical death, the failing of our bodies, we do not have to fear spiritual death. What an amazing God we serve! We also have something more to look forward to, the place which we are going after we die.

Jesus told the criminal that he would be with him in “paradise.”^{viii} What is this paradise that Jesus is talking about? We immediately jump to heaven and I would agree that is what Jesus is talking about. Hamilton shares that in the Greek New Testament text that paradise would be translated to “the king’s garden.”^{ix} This translation gives us great spiritual depth about what Jesus was referring to.

Again, we are called to go back to the very beginning of the Old Testament in Genesis 3 where Adam and Eve were in the garden, it was paradise, they had everything they needed. At that point they were immortal, just like God. Then they committed a crime against God, by disobeying the only law that God had set before them. In that moment, they experienced a spiritual death...they lost their likeness of God, they become mortal and could experience physical death, and pain and suffering. They, on their own, were no longer able to put themselves back in a right relationship with God and they were cast out of the garden of paradise.

We know that this is not the end of the story...God continued to remember them...God looked for them and preserved their lives. God saved them from physical death. From that moment on we needed a solution outside of ourselves to our sin problem and the solution is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When Jesus told the criminal “today you will be with me in the king’s garden” (Luke 23:43) Jesus was not referring to the garden of Eden.

Jesus was referring to a new garden, a place where spiritual death would turn into spiritual life. A place where mourning would turn to dancing, and our itchy sackcloth, the trappings of death, would be replaced with joy (Psalm 30:11-12).

The amazing thing about the God we serve is that God takes death and turns it into new life and most of the time this happens in the garden. Hamilton recounts the events that occurred in the garden: “Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane...he was crucified in a garden at Calvary...when Jesus was raised from the dead, Mary Magdalene saw him and thought he was a gardener.”^x

Jesus takes the rotten and broken garden from Genesis and creates within it everlasting life. We too, through our faith in Jesus Christ, are invited into this garden, into heaven where as Revelation 21:4 tells us: “There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." Although I am not quite ready to visit this garden, I am thankful that it is a place that God has already prepared for us.

In the meantime, God is still calling us to participate in this ministry of remembering others and inviting them into the kingdom of God on earth so they may experience the kingdom of God in heaven.

John Wesley, while he attended Oxford University, was passionate about living out this calling. He embodied this practice by visiting the prisons and sharing the good news of Christ with the prisoners. We see this same action lived out today through the Kairos prison ministry which is taking place in the Augusta Correctional Center as we speak.

Today convicted criminals and team members are coming together as they both seek to receive the grace of God which is available to all. In United Methodism we call this practice of sharing our faith with others “social holiness”; John Wesley said, ““There is no religion that is not social, no holiness that is not social.”^{xi} Our faith is not meant to be kept a secret, but it meant to be shared with everyone who will hear.

This same principle is carried over into our United Methodist Social Principles in which we show that our faith spills over into our relationships with others. The social principle related to the death penalty states: “We believe the death penalty denies the power of Christ to redeem, restore and transform all human beings.”^{xii} This statement does not deny that murder is wrong and that people should be held accountable for their actions, what it does state is that like criminal experienced as he hung on the cross, every person deserves to have the moment where they accept Christ and experience salvation.

We too are called to participate in Christ’s ministry of redemption. What is Christ calling us to do? How is Christ calling us to embody God’s love to those imprisoned in our midst or those who feel as if they are forgotten? This season of Lent, may we empty ourselves of judgement and apathy and be filled with the grace of God. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ Adam Hamilton “Final Words from the Cross.” Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2011. P. 43.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, P. 44.

^{iv} Ibid, P. 38.

^v <https://www.umcmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-128-Free-Grace>.

^{vi} NRSV. Luke 23:43.

^{vii} Adam Hamilton “Final Words from the Cross.” Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2011. P. 45.

^{viii} NRSV. Luke 23:43.

^{ix} Adam Hamilton “Final Words from the Cross.” Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2011. P. 48.

^x Ibid, P. 49.

^{xi} <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/united-methodist-beliefs-social-holiness>

^{xii} <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/political-community#death-penalty>

Additional Resources

Keck et al. “The New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentary.” Vol. VIII. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 1995. P. 450-463.