

Seven: Remember Me

The God Who Can't Forget Is With The Rejected

Luke 23:32-43

32 Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. **33** 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. **34** Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

35 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."

36 The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar **37** and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."

38 There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the jews.

39 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

40 But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? **41** We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

43 Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

In the world that we live in the powerful seem to have all the privileges. Just this past week we saw an example of that in the news. What the FBI referred to as Project Varsity Blues was merely another example of the privileged once again working the system to their advantage. Most of the students involved in this appear not to be a fault, it was their parents that decide to bribe people. Still these were families that already had advantages over everyone else. Want to be rich? Well the single best way to become rich is to start with rich parents. Want to have power

and influence? Again starting with parents with power and influence ups that chance. Wealth begets wealth. Influence begets influence. Power begets power.

If the advantages that naturally come from being in an upper class family aren't enough to get you into the school your family wants you to gain access to, well then you can just take advantage of some of the resources that are meant for the less fortunate. That is what really gets me with the news concerning Project Varsity Blues. Academically these families already had all the advantages. When it turned out those weren't enough they were contacted by an individual who had determined ways that they could use advantages meant to offset some of the problems others, less fortunate than they, face. Can't get your scores high enough even with a tutor? Then have a physician declare you have a learning disability and then we can rig the SATs for you. Can't get into the school you want still? Well we can bribe a coach to let you in as a student athlete, a way that has traditionally allowed more impoverished students to gain access to a better education. With enough money it doesn't matter that you don't play the sport or that your high school didn't even have that sport. The powerful get all the advantages, even those that we have specifically meant for those who need the most help in our society.

That's part of what I love about today's passage. Where is Jesus portrayed during the passion? In the midst of the rabble of society, surrounded by the condemned. When predicting His death Jesus described the moment as the hour of this glorification (John 12:23 "Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.") and who was at His right and left? Two thieves. Two who were viewed as such a threat to society that they must be exterminated in such a manner as to remind others not to follow in their behavior. This is not how we typically think of moments of glory. We will soon have graduation parties going on all around us. These students will be "glorified" for what they have done, and rightly so. We will dress up and throw a

grand party. We will invite those who are important to us. Places of honor will be reserved for those who are being honored and much like a head table at a wedding there is an order to those places.

This is why the mother of James & John broached the subject of places of honor with Jesus.

20 Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.

21 "What is it you want?" he asked.

She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."

22 "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"

"We can," they answered.

23 Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father."

Matthew 20:20-23

But who was Jesus to be surrounded by? The lowly. The troublemakers. The rebels. Last week I talk a little about who these "thieves" were. You have probably heard the familiar saying that Jesus was crucified not on the altar between two candles but on Golgotha between two thieves. That's a good saying, isn't it? But it doesn't go quite far enough, because they weren't just thieves. According to Mark and Matthew, they were worse than mere thieves; they were bandits, armed robbers, men of violence, prepared to kill as well as steal.¹ Imagine Robinhood without the giving to the poor part. These were men of violence opposed to the current societal

¹ Fleming Rutledge, *The Seven Last Words from the Cross*, Kindle location 108.

situation and willing to do harm to anyone necessary for their own betterment. And they were the ones on Jesus' left and right.

This shouldn't surprise us. As we have seen over the past year in reading the Gospel According to Luke Jesus' normally aligned Himself with "bad elements"². Thus why one of the traditional titles of Jesus is "Friend of Sinners". We sing about Him with such words, but the leaders of his day used such words to describe Him as the wrong sort of messiah and to say that He was possessed by a demon (Matthew 11:18-19)³ So as usual Jesus was surrounded by the type of people that according to the religious leaders of the day said the Messiah was never supposed to be surrounded by. The Messiah should have the powerful, holy, and noble at His right and left, not the rejected and condemned. But on either side of Jesus "sat" the wrong sort of people.

In antebellum American history there was a game played in slave cabins. When the plantation owners where in their well furnished homes and all was finally dark the slaves would exercise the limited freedom they had and raise their tired bodies to play a simple little game. One person would whisper "where is Jesus". When another finally answered "Here is Jesus" most would then move as quickly as they could in these cramped, non-illuminated cabins to where Jesus had been "found". When they reached that point they would whisper "He is not here" and someone in another area of the cabin would respond with "He is here" and the process would begin again. The game could last all night as men, women, and children desperately searched for the sacred in the midst of their dark and desperate cabins.⁴ While the game is tragic it is also

² Ibid, location 107.

³ 18 For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' 19 The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved right by her deeds."

⁴ Edward J. Blum, Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*, 93.

beautiful. These enslaved individuals knew something that we far too easily forget, that even if we have trouble finding Him the place to search for Jesus is in the midst of those going through dark and terrible circumstances because that is where He makes his dwelling.

Even the beatitudes teach us this. When are we blessed? When we are:

- Poor
- Mourning
- Meek
- Hungry & Thirsty
- Persecuted
- Insulted
- Falsely Accused⁵

These are not moments of power and privilege but they are moments where Jesus can easily be found. We are specially blessed (happy) at such times because Immanuel, God with us, has staked his “Tent of Meeting” (tabernacle) with us at such times. Because where the weak, forsaken, and troubled are there we will find the Prince of Peace hiding in the circumstances. Where is Jesus we ask? Oh He is here.

One of the thieves somehow knew this. I don’t know how he learned enough to place his trust in Jesus. Had he experienced Jesus’s ministry somehow before all of this chaos? Had he heard of the miraculous love that this Son of Man had for the weak? Had he merely seen enough of Jesus’s countenance during the events of the Lord’s passion to know that this was no ordinary man but God presenting His strength in weakness. I don’t know how he came to recognize that the One beside him was the very One Who this thief desperately needed to be remembered by.

⁵ Matthew 5:3-12 Luke 6:20-23 - specifically for the difference “poor” and “poor in spirit”

Yet somehow through the blood and bruises, the cuts and the humiliation this thief recognized the King of a new Kingdom and he said to this King, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Remember me. One of the basics of how we describe God, the One Who we can never hope to adequately describe, are the “omni” descriptors of God. God is **Omnipotent** - He is all powerful, there is nothing he can't do except not be Himself. God is **Omnipresent** - He is everywhere, and therefore He is everywhere we hope to be and also everywhere that we fear. God is also **Omniscient** - God is all knowing. This means he doesn't accidentally forget. Even our sins, which Jeremiah 31:34 says that God will not only forgive our sins but “will remember (our) sins no more”, aren't accidentally forgotten by Him, but instead purposely no longer remembered by Him. God isn't like you and I who often forget what we just left a room to accomplish. The thief asked the God Who does not forget to remember him and this is exactly what Jesus wants to do for the wretched Who He chooses to surround Himself with.

It is written in Isaiah 49:14-16:

14 But Zion said, “The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me.” **15** “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! **16** See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.

The Messiah Who was on the cross beside this thief was the God Who engraves our names upon His palms. He not only will not forget us but He chooses to not forget us. It is no accident of His omniscient nature that He remembers us. It is His choice.

In our world it looks like the powerful always win. Yet Jesus in His earthly ministry choose to surround Himself with the rejected of human society. He did so in His life and He

continued to do so in His death. It may look like Caesar choose who would die beside Jesus, afterall it was the authority of Rome by which those nails were placed in His and the two thieves' bodies. Jesus made clear to Pontius Pilate that Pilate would have no authority over Jesus if that power had not been given to him from above (John 19:11). So the two who would "sat" on His right and left had been determined long before Jesus's crucifixion. They had the places of "honor" at Jesus's glorification and one of them recognized it for what it was.

So what do we do with this in our daily lives? First, I believe we need to be constantly reminded to look for Jesus in the weak and the downcast. Matthew 25 reminds us to do this. To make sure that we are feeding Him when He is hungry, giving Him something to drink when He is thirsty, visiting Him when He is sick or imprisoned (Matthew 25:31-46). The temptation in the world is to look for the glory of God in the powerful and the spectacular. The reality, however, is that we stand a much better chance of finding Jesus in the lowly and awful because it is usually there that we find Him, even if it is in His most distressing disguises.

Secondly, we need to remember that when we feel at our most lowly Jesus is there with us. He has not nor will He ever forget us. Even though the circumstances may lead us to feel that he have been forgot and forsaken, Immanuel is still there with us and has not forgotten us because He has written your name upon His palm. One of the beautiful things from the story of thief is how little faith is involved. The thief has done no great works, he had not proven his complete trust in Jesus. He simply asked the "God Who Does Not Forget" to remember him. It wasn't the thief's great faith that led to his being remembered, instead it was the greatness of the One in Whom he had placed his small amount of faith that meant this thief would not be forgotten.

If we are honest with ourselves we are all wretched. We strive to pretend we are so much more. We put on great masks that we have it all together and do everything we can to signal to others that we are “good enough, smart enough, and doggone it people like us”⁶ but if we are honest with ourselves we know the truth that at our best we still fall way “short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23) and we really don’t even want to consider ourselves at our worst. We sit in need of a Savior and thankfully our God chooses to place at His right and His left the “bad elements” of the world. Our salvation rests not in our great our faith is but the greatness of the One Who remembers our names. During the Lord’s Supper we eat the bread and drink the juice to remember the Lord’s death until He comes⁷ (1 Corinthians 11:26) because we far too easily forget. We can, however, rest assured that He remembers all who have asked to be remembered by Him.

Where is Jesus. Oh He is in the midst of the wretched for He has not forgotten us.

⁶ <https://youtu.be/6ldAQ6Rh5ZI?t=40>

⁷ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.