



“The Second Word: Today You Will Be with Me in Paradise”

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Luke 23:35-43

Fred Craddock tells about a family that was taking a lovely Sunday afternoon drive, when suddenly the children began shouting, “Stop the car! There’s a kitten by the road!” The father kept on driving, but his children wouldn’t quiet down. He tried to reason with them. The kitten was probably someone’s pet. It might have a disease. The family already had too many pets. It did no good. The children insisted that a loving father would stop the car for a stray cat. So, finally the father drove back to the spot and reached for the scraggly kitten. The ungrateful little beast scratched him! Fighting an instinct to strangle the kitten, the father packed it into the car and took it home.

Once at home, the children created a bed for the kitten out of their softest blankets. They fed the kitten droppers full of milk. They petted and fussed over the kitten. Soon, the kitten was purring and rubbing on family members, especially the father, as if he were its best friend. The father looked at the scars on his hand left by the frightened and ungrateful kitten. Then he looked at the comfortable, well-fed kitten rubbing against his leg. Had he suddenly become worthier of love? No. His intentions toward the cat had always been to do it good, not harm. Something had happened to the kitten that made it feel secure, loved, accepted. The kitten, though scared and resistant at first, had finally received paradise.

On Ash Wednesday we began our sermon and song series called “The Seven Last Words of Jesus.” And so, beginning on Wednesday and then on every Sunday in Lent up until Easter morning, we will examine Jesus’ last words from the cross, his sayings of hope and promise as well as his petitions of pain. And these next Sundays of Lent will be uncomfortable. The event of Jesus on the cross and God’s connection to the crucified Christ is mysterious and tender and heavy. And we might feel as if we are lingering in the suffering of Jesus, remaining for these 40 days of Lent with the beaten, bruised, and betrayed Christ on the cross. But, I think that is exactly what we are supposed to experience in Lent... the intense pain and sacrifice that just won’t leave us be.

But we will move through the seven last words of Jesus and end up at Easter with a bright and bold word, a word of beginning, of new hope, of starting again. By the time we reach the glorious resurrection, I hope these words from a crucified Christ would have been nailed into our souls – the abandonment, the thirst, the fear, the fatigue, and the loneliness – all of the words that connect us to the slain savior. And that will be the fertile ground from which a revived and resurrected hope will grow and flourish.

And so, this past Wednesday we explored the first word, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing.” And this word of forgiveness was spoken as a plea from the dying Jesus to

the Almighty God. It was a word spoken between a Son and a Father – that even though Jesus was experiencing the pain of dereliction and death, he asked God to love and forgive even his worst enemies, the very ones who had put him on the cross. Basically, forgiving those who had sentenced him to death, those who had driven the nails into his wrists, those who had lifted him high on a tree was Jesus' way of showing the radical love of an all-inclusive God to the world – a love that was so radical that God in Jesus cared about forgiving his enemies even while pummeled by pain and torture. This radical love shows that we mean more to God than even God's own self. You and I, we ALL matter to God!

And so, knowing that we matter to God, we must sit with our rawness and vulnerability as we live these next few weeks in the shadow of the cross. We need to sit with the realization that often pain and death must happen before we experience the abundance of life; that the old must change before the new can form; that the cross must be experienced before paradise obtained. Pain and paradise are things we must hold in tension. The two are inseparable, just as Christmas and the cross are inseparable. It is impossible to appreciate the events of Bethlehem except in the light of Golgotha. For the hand that reached down to bless our lives in the babe in the manger is indeed covered with scratches.

And just like the season of Lent being bittersweet as the shadow of the cross leads to the light of resurrection, this first word of forgiveness and this second word of paradise are both remarkable and confusing at the same time. For how could Jesus, who was suffering under the weight of the sinful world, hanging on a torture device made of wood, have enough mercy left in his depleted body to offer forgiveness and hope to the condemned criminal crucified beside him? How could Jesus offer paradise when he was experiencing so much pain? That is what the season of Lent is like for us. We can't seem to push through our guilt and shame long enough to accept God's gift of love. We kick and scratch at the open hand God reaches out to us. We are confused about the paradise that God offers even in the midst of a painful crucifixion. We are condemned thieves scratching and clawing at the dying Christ, hoping for some sort of salvation.

And just like the people who Jesus forgave, the ones who shouted "crucify him" and held the hammer that hit the nails, we too are the criminals condemned. I don't know about you, but I identify with the thief and his humble request for Jesus to remember him. For I too have failed and fumbled through this life. And as I reach out for Jesus I too hear the hum of imperfection vibrating in my ears. "Jesus would never let me experience Paradise. I'm not worthy and I mess up way too much. Lent only reminds me that I'm not worth saving."

But Jesus remembered that thief and Jesus remembers us. The thief didn't do anything to deserve the love of God or to be with Jesus in paradise. Nothing. The thief was a broken, dishonest, crucified sinner. But Jesus was dripping with grace from the cross. It was pure and powerful grace. We don't deserve the grace of Jesus but we are reminded that today, we will be with Jesus in paradise. And that's what happens when we follow Jesus. When we follow Jesus, we overflow with love for the world so that we can bring the paradise of the divine love of God to all people.

In this Lenten season when we are beckoned to kneel our hearts at the cross of Christ, maybe it would be important for us to kneel at the cross of the penitent thief as well. Maybe we need to learn from the thief and echo his cry of "Jesus, remember me when you come into your

kingdom.” Maybe we need to cry out, “Jesus, Savior, help us make a paradise on earth where no one is hurt, no one is hungry, no one is alone, no one is hated. Jesus, Savior, remember this broken world and build your paradise right here and right now!”

And then the words rang out in the thick air on Golgotha, “Today, you will be with me in paradise!” These were Jesus’ words to the thief on the cross and they are his words to us as well. But, as I hear these words, I can’t help but wonder about where paradise is and what it looks like. Some say that paradise and heaven are the same thing – the eternal dwelling place of God that is “out there” or “up there.” Other folks say that paradise refers to the Garden of Eden, before the first humans sinned, and it refers to the future perfect kingdom that God will once again establish here on earth. For me, I think it is both – paradise is both heavenly and earthly, because the book of Revelation tells us that God will one day create a new heaven and a new earth. And what will paradise look like? Some think it will be a place of beauty like that first Garden in the book of Genesis, and others think it will be a place of golden streets and pearly gates like John described. But what if paradise isn’t about where the thief would go after he died, but about the thief’s willingness to accept God’s open hand of love? Accepting God’s love equips us to bring that love to the world and change the world and reshape the world.

There’s an old story about a man who spoke with God about Heaven and Hell. “I will show you Hell,” said the Lord. And they went into a room which had a large pot of stew in the middle. The smell was delicious and around the pot sat people who were famished and desperate. All were holding spoons with very long handles which reached to the pot, but because the handles of the spoons were longer than their arms, it was impossible to get the stew into their mouths. Their suffering was terrible. “Now I will show you Heaven,” said the Lord, and they went into an identical room. There was a similar pot of stew and the people had the same identical spoons, but they were well nourished, talking and happy. At first the man did not understand. “It is simple,” said the Lord. “You see, they have learned to feed each other.”

Paradise simply isn’t about heaven after we die. Paradise is when we love each other and serve each other and make life better for someone else here and now. That is the reality that Jesus beckons of us this second Sunday of Lent. Our Lenten task is to find ways to follow Jesus, the one who, in the midst of his pain and suffering, found a way to offer paradise to others. We are thieves in need of forgiveness and paradise, but we also have a responsibility to bring that forgiveness and paradise to others in this broken world.

It is important in Lent to remember that whatever we are experiencing here on earth, paradise is right around the corner. It doesn’t matter what you have done, what mistakes you have made, or how many people you’ve hurt, our God is a God of second chances. Lent is the season of second chances. We have a second chance to say I’m sorry. We have a second chance to make something right. We have a second change to repair a relationship or do the right thing. We have a second chance to help someone in need. We have a second chance to go after that dream or to say yes to an opportunity. I know there are many things we’d like to have a second chance on. What we have already seen in the first two words of Christ from the cross this past Wednesday and now today is that Jesus reveals the salvation of a second chance God.

Even while Jesus was dying on the cross he was forgiving all of those people who hurt him and crucified him. He gave them all second chances. And now, while still on the cross between two thieves, who had messed up to the point of receiving capital punishment, even they were wrapped in the mercy of the divine. And Jesus gave the humble thief a second chance. The thief named his sin, named his brokenness, and asked boldly to be remembered, to have a second chance. And paradise was found. Preacher David Lose understands, “This One, you see, strung up by the Empire for treason and insurrection is, as it turns out, not merely challenging the orders of the world but overturning them altogether and establishing a new reign governed not by might, power and judgment but rather by love, mercy and grace. For he is the King, reigning from his unlikely throne, granting second chances to us all.”

And as these next few weeks of Lent lead us to the cross, to Jesus’ death, and eventually to the resurrection, we are reminded that death and destruction and pain and guilt are not final. We don’t simply get a second chance or a final chance but that God’s grace and mercy and forgiveness are available to us all the time, whenever we ask Jesus to remember us. That is paradise. That is a world filled with love.

Don’t get me wrong, I know that we won’t experience true paradise in this life. But we do get glimpses of it – foretastes of glory divine. Each and every time we gaze towards the cross and hear the words of a forgiving and merciful Christ, we remember Jesus’ promise of paradise. Through Jesus’ gift of love on the cross we have been given a second chance, thieves that we are, to make this world more of the paradise that God intends it to be. Let us each be the pierced hands and feet of Christ in the world. Let us give hope to the nations and proclaim proudly, “Today, you will ALL be with me in paradise.”

Amen.