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Midweek Lent 1

February 25, 2015

“You will be with Me in Paradise”

(Lk. 23:39-43)

Rev. David K. Groth

“One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.’ And he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ And he said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise’” (Luke 23:39–43).

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, You despise nothing You have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create in us new and contrite hearts that lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness we may receive from You full pardon and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Eugene Lang, a millionaire industrialist was asked to address a group of 51 sixth graders in East Harlem. He knew most of these kids would be dropping out before they graduated high school. What could he say to inspire them to stay in? During his speech, and rather impulsively, he said, "Stay in school and I'll help pay the college tuition of every one of you." At that moment, their lives changed. They had hope. One student said, "I had something to look forward to, something waiting for me. It was a golden feeling." 48 of the 51 graduated from high school and most of those went on to college. Mr. Lang never regretted his rather impulsive promise, though I suspect his children and grandchildren might have!

What a difference hope makes in life! Without it, you feel as if you're lost, almost suffocating. But with hope, you catch new breath and vitality! Hope is an essential. As I visit folks in the hospital, I can usually tell those who are more likely to recover quickly. They are the ones who have hope in their eyes and voices. Someone once said that lost hope is the undertaker's best friend. And the book of Proverbs says, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick" (Prov. 13:12).

Young people need hope. Today many young people see life as hopeless. They feel trapped and without control of their own destinies. Among teenagers, traffic fatalities are the number one cause of death. Suicide is number two. It wouldn't be that way if they had hope.

Middle age people need hope. Many of them live with unfulfilled dreams. They have not succeeded in their

careers, finances, marriages and families as they had hoped, and they feel a certain hopelessness that things will improve.

Elderly people need hope. For many of them, life is in the past tense. There is nothing for them to look forward to. They answer the question “What’s left?” with a silent stare, not wanting to talk about increasing illness and death. For many of them, hope is a thing of the past.

Even churches need hope. A church without hope lives in the glories of the past, and just tries to survive without any real dreams or plans for the future, and without any significant impact.

Today we consider someone who had no reason to hope for anything. He was a criminal being executed. He was a thief who had been nailed to a cross. He had nothing to look forward to. He was waiting for death, and then whatever might come after death for criminals. Yet, in this most hopeless condition, Jesus gave him the gift of hope. And if Jesus can bring hope to someone like him, Jesus can certainly bring hope to you!

Two criminals were crucified along with Jesus. One was to the left and the other to the right. Why were they being executed? Luke’s gospel simply says that they were criminals. Others translate it as malefactors (evildoers). Matthew’s gospel is more specific, identifying them as thieves. Roman justice was severe. They didn’t fool around; one strike and you’re out!

Verse 39 of the text says that one of these thieves along with the crowd started mocking Jesus. He taunted Jesus, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” What a guy! Even while he himself is dying, he still has energy enough to take a few parting shots at Jesus.

Jesus has nothing to say to this man. But the other criminal does speak up. “Do you not fear God” he asks, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”

This criminal we now refer to as the penitent thief, for he has acknowledged that he has done wrong and that he

deserves punishment for it. He does not blame others. He does not play the victim. He “owns up” to his evil acts. He confesses his sin and guilt.

This thief models what we are called to do—to repent! You may not have been convicted of grand larceny. You probably have never robbed a bank. But you too have been a thief. You may have cheated on an exam and so stolen someone else’s answers. You may have fudged the numbers on your tax return and so stolen from your fellow citizens. You may have wasted time at work and so stolen from your employer.

Sometimes people ask me if it’s okay to go to the casino and gamble. My answer is, first show me that you’re tithing and giving alms to the poor and then I’ll be ready to have that conversation. Even giving our pets excessive love and medical attention can be a form of stealing, because there are human beings nearby who need your love and attention and care and generosity.

There are many ways to steal. I don’t think any of us wiggles out of this commandment without abrasions. In God’s eyes, you are a thief. So am I. Like the thief on the cross, we must confess that we too “are under the same sentence of condemnation.”

But notice, that thief didn’t just admit his guilt. He also turned to Jesus for mercy. (That’s the necessary and second part of confession: looking to Jesus for mercy and grace.) He says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (v. 42). In his most hopeless hour, this criminal looked for hope in Jesus.

Most everyone else there at Golgotha was mocking Jesus as a pseudo-king. But this thief recognized true kingship in the man who hung next to him. He recognized that Jesus had a kingdom, one not of this world, yet one that was imminent. He asked Jesus to remember him as he entered that kingdom.

When we say, “Remember me the next time you go for a hike,” we really mean, “Please take me along.” So this man’s plea is: “Jesus, take me along with you as you go into your kingdom.”

During Jesus' trial and crucifixion, Jesus spoke very little to those who were interrogating him. If you have a red letter edition of the Bible, you'll see very little red on those pages. He spoke very little to Pontius Pilate. He spoke not a word to King Herod. He did not respond to the taunts of those who were mocking him. But now he speaks and answers the repentant thief with a firm promise of hope: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

This is his second statement from the cross. These are words of a king who promises a kingdom. They are words of hope for the hopeless. He says: "Truly . . . (that is, this is for certain; this is without a doubt, no question about it) . . . today (that is, not in some distant future but within hours) . . . you will (not might be, not if you're lucky, or *if* you pass the cut). No! Today you *will* be with me in paradise (that is, in the perfect kingdom, Eden restored)."

Jesus' words here are words of promise, and he is one who never breaks a promise. Can you imagine the impact of that promise? This man goes from utter hopelessness to perfect hope! His future moves from the prospect of perishing under God and man's wrath, to the prospect of life in God's kingdom! And it is all because of the promise of Jesus.

I ask: what did that thief do to deserve that promise? What did he do to earn this paradise? Of course, the answer is absolutely nothing! It's just one more biblical example that teaches we are saved by grace alone. The man deserved condemnation, but he received justification. He deserved reprobation, but he receives restoration. He deserved perdition, but received paradise.

We too are malefactors—evil doers—because we also have done evil in God's sight. We too are "under the same sentence of condemnation," the same sentence of death, because "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). We too, by ourselves, have no hope, nothing to look forward to. And like the criminal, we cannot save ourselves. We cannot pry ourselves off of the cross. We're stuck, pinned down, waiting for death and whatever comes after it for criminals.

But Christ has come and identified with sinners like

us. “Friend of sinners” they called him. As the prophet foretold, “He was numbered with the transgressors” (Isaiah 53). And through repentance and forgiveness, through baptism and faith, we are linked with Christ in his death and his life, which means we also inherit paradise. Maybe not today; maybe not tomorrow, but some day we *will* be with him in paradise.

If it depended on us and our works, we could never be sure, could we, because we could never know whether or not we’ve accumulated enough good works to tip the scale in our direction. But because it’s all grace, because it’s God’s doing and not ours, because it’s the death of Jesus and the promise of Jesus, we can know with a certainty where we are going on the day we die. “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

This gives us hope . . . not just for the future, not just for your last day, but for this day too. Whatever it is you face: failure and pain, discouragement and disease, whatever it is you face, you have hope. The Christian always has hope. Through adversity and disappointment, there is the promise of a new day under the grace and mercy and strength of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is the promise of one who walks with us, one who loves us and one to whom belongs all authority in heaven and on earth. When it’s by grace, we always have hope, for this day and the next.

So, when you come before the throne of judgment, if given the chance to speak, don’t plead any work that you have done. Don’t even plead the faith you have. Plead the promise of God in the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Like this thief, look to Christ and him alone for life and salvation. He will not disappoint you.

Amen

