

Slide – three crosses

At St. John's we are familiar with the Prayer around the Cross. In Lent we gather for worship to reflect on God's word and we come and light a candle as we pray around the cross. We practice this prayer and this action during Lent when we are encouraged to reflect more deeply on the character of God and our relationship with the divine and one another.

Today's gospel text has us gathering around the story of Jesus' crucifixion. The characters in the story are gathered around the cross. The story tells us what people expect of Jesus, they are waiting down to the last moment for Jesus to save himself. They are waiting for him to do something, but they wait, and nothing seems to happen. The bystanders around the cross do what most of us do when things don't proceed as we expect, they comment and question and in this case, mock the one who is not living up to their expectations. Everyone becomes a critique.

It is humanity is at its worst. Did they know there was truth embedded in their jeers? The gospel writer Luke uses a grammar rule called a condition of fact to put the truth of who Jesus is in the mouths of his detractors. Our English translation could be altered slightly to get the sense. For example, the faith leaders who have rejected Jesus mock him by saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" Emphasizing the condition of fact it reads, "He saved others; let him save himself SINCE he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"

The soldiers following orders of their commanding officers and presenting Jesus with sour wine said, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" But their words could just as likely read, "SINCE you are the King of the Jews, and you are, save yourself!" So out of the mouths of Jesus' enemies we hear the truth of who Jesus is. He is both Messiah and King, but what kind of King is he? When will he wield power over his enemies? When will he do as he wants, because if we were king, we would use our powers to secure what our personal wants and desires?

What do we want for this world, for this time? Our thinking is affected by the context of our life. One of the great challenges according to our text is to wrestle with the topic of who deserves mercy. Who deserves our care to give a second chance, a deeper look, a favorable view, and a hand in the time of need? Who deserves the gift of our relationship? Who deserves our compassion rather than cold judgement?

Luke the gospel writer stresses the innocence of Jesus more than the others. Before Jesus is condemned to die by crucifixion he is on trial before the Roman governor Pilate. I have always thought of Pilate as someone who is not emotionally invested in Jesus, so he does not care about what happens to him. When he looks at the law Pilate "found in (Jesus) him no ground for the sentence of death. In Luke's story, Herod known as king over Galilee but really only serving the Roman interests agrees with Pilate that Jesus is not guilty of the charges the faith leaders have brought against him. They do not see Jesus as deserving death. In the end Pilate granted the urgent demands of the leaders despite his better judgement.

In our text this morning the first criminal sounds off about Jesus, "You are the Messiah, are you not? Save yourself and us! But the second criminal offers his own thoughts when he rebukes the other thief, "this man has done nothing wrong." Finally, it is in Luke's gospel account that the centurion's confession sums up all comments of the others, "Certainly this man was innocent."

Jesus did not deserve to suffer, be put on trial and die a cruel death. He truly is the Innocent One. Whereas today we might take this view, the chief priest, the scribes and the leaders of the people of faith in Jesus' day were looking for ways to kill him. They were ones who were threatened by his life and manner. They were threatened by Jesus' preference for the poor, the ones' whose needs were not being met, the most vulnerable in the day's society, and those taking the brunt of unjust policies.

For his stance with the poor, the neglected, the vulnerable and the oppressed, Jesus suffered death on a cross. We admire this stance today but find that we can be in similar binds. Who do we look to as having authority in life, those who wield power and speak from the vantage point of wealth, OR those who live a life of service? Who do we claim as our friends and people of influence? Do we have biases that are hidden to our consciousness?

The saving nature of Christ is that he taught his followers to love, even to the point of death. Jesus shows a way of loving so generously that one would be called to give one's own life for the sake of others. If that is the case, we will need to do more than admire Jesus.

#### Slide – Mercy

If Jesus is one we talk about as not deserving what happened to him, can we have any good conversations about who is deserving of grace and second chances? We live in a time of attitude polarization where opinions and beliefs are often strong and extreme. In such times it becomes more difficult to talk with those of different views. Instead of deep listening to one another people make assumptions about others. Too often we judge from a distance rather than immersing ourselves in the daily context of people in real time.

In my study this week I came across two articles by chance that address this topic of what one deserves. I don't propose any particular stance but found the contrast thought provoking.

First I read of the case of Kelly Gissendaner who plotted with a lover the murder of her husband, Douglas, in 1997. Four years ago in 2015 she was executed in the state of Georgia while the man who carried out the gruesome plan serves a life sentence. While in prison Kelly converted to Christianity and demonstrated that hers was a genuine conversion. She earned a theology certificate from Emory University and ministered to other inmates with a message of God's love which gave them hope in times when they were desperate. As her date of execution drew near, a group of former inmates transformed by Kelly's prison ministry joined others in pleading for clemency. Inmates, correctional officers, Pope Francis, supporters in the general public as well as Kelly's three children appealed that Kelly's sentence be commuted to life in prison. However, all did not wish for that. Members of Douglas' family of origin spoke in favor of the execution citing the need for justice for their loved family member.

From a safe distance of not knowing anyone in this particular situation or any similar one, it could be easy to make judgements. Some easily come to the conclusion she did the crime so she should serve her time whatever the sentence may be. Their view is that whatever else happened to her after the conviction should not matter.

Then I came across a recent interview of Sister Helen Prejean who became famous for her efforts to abolish the death penalty through her book *Dead Man Walking* which was dramatized in a 1995 film. In the interview she said, "Few people get close to the reality of the death penalty. They don't know that it is a practice of cruelty and torture, the predetermined, deliberate killing of human beings after

rendering them defenseless.” She has walked with several death row inmates in the 15 to 20 years it takes for such convictions to reach the time of execution. She has spoken with the families of victims of the re-victimization they experience over the 15-20 year timeline. She saw guards and wardens become overwhelmed by the push to take a person’s life rather than reform them. She has been in conversation with the Church and government and legislators. In her analysis, the executions by state are acts of violence as brutal as the deeds of the person convicted. It took immersing herself with all the players in this drama to come to this understanding. Sister Prejean in her work found people who were willing to apply mercy rather than continue with a sentence of death that enacts vengeance.

Who deserves mercy? How does one discern the matter of granting mercy? When is it possible? Our trouble often comes in trying to figure things out with the use of an-eye-for-an-eye calculations from a safe distance. Meanwhile we find ourselves being the recipients of grace and forgiveness that we did not deserve simply because we are known by Jesus.

The story for this morning ends with such a show of mercy. Jesus uses his power to grant mercy in an incredibly gracious fashion. Whatever crime or evil the second criminal had done was no barrier for Jesus who granted acceptance and forgiveness. Jesus offered direct access to salvation for another rather than save himself. Jesus offered mercy to one who was receiving extreme punishment by the state. Jesus forgives those who are carrying out his suffering and death and those who mock him.

I wonder if it shocked some that Jesus ignored the calls to save himself. It is through the cross that he comes into his kingdom. Christ has a different way. St. Paul wrote, “Christ disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in the cross.” Colossians 2:15. This is the moment when all enemies of God will be done in. This is where those deemed unfit and not right may share in the salvation of the righteous. Jesus’ reign is not a death dealing system intent on revenge and punishment, though we know too well how to do that math, but a “Paradise”, a repairing of human sinfulness in the present time for those whom we do not think deserve it.

Grace is when God gives us what we don’t deserve. Mercy is when God doesn’t give us what we do deserve. Either way it is abundant and freeing. It helps each of us in our own lives and propels us toward others with a kinder and compassionate view.

Story of bill White.