

Sunday May 24, 2020

Lesson 13: Grace to the Dying Thief

Scripture: Luke 23: 32-33, 39-43

Context:

The lesson moves to the Gospel of Luke and recounts the crucifixion story of Jesus. There is nothing pretty about the scene as details are given about the nature of Jesus's death. He will die as condemned by the Roman Empire as a common criminal.

The first part of our text sets the place: The Skull. The ominous name is not the same as the Aramaic "Golgotha" (Latin: Calvary) and yet conveys this is a scary place.¹ There are not a lot of details about what all happened with the crucifixion as the writer assumes the reader will know the nature of the cross and how the process occurs.² The Romans made it a used form of execution because it warned the public about crimes against Rome as it also added shame, pain, and a slow death.³ It was an agonizing and humiliating way to die.

There are two added individuals to Jesus's crucifixion story. He is led to The Skull with two other convicted criminals. One of the criminals adds a third to the taunts of the rulers and soldiers: he says, in effect, if you are the Messiah, get us down from here.⁴ He is representative of what the readers have heard thus far; those who want to test Jesus's "power" and how he cannot deliver what is expected.

As a foil to this other criminal is another criminal on the opposite side of Jesus. When hearing the other criminal jump in with the taunts of those antagonizing Jesus, this other criminal rebukes him. He reminds him of their own deserved punishment and the innocence of Jesus. He then expresses faith in Jesus and ask Jesus to remember him when Jesus comes into his kingly power.⁵ Jesus assures him a place in Paradise.

This exchange at the cross is only found in the Gospel of Luke. Here, the author presents an act of salvation in which the word "saved" is turned on its head. Several times during his crucifixion, Jesus has been taunted to "save" himself and others. At his death, Jesus does save someone and the one saved is a dying criminal.⁶ Jesus radicalizes what it means to be "saved" and how it rarely fits human standards.

¹ Fred B. Craddock, "Luke," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2009), 272.

² Ibid., 272.

³ Ibid., 272.

⁴ Ibid., 273.

⁵ Ibid., 274.

⁶ Ibid., 274.

Application

How fitting is it that one of Jesus's last acts on earth is to give grace to a criminal as others mock and deride him? Even as people taunt and cry for him to show his power, Jesus chooses not to engage in their human standard of "saving." Instead, he does something to transcend the limited understanding of what it means to save.

I have often heard this story presented as one to bring up the conversation about what happens if you've lived a sinful life and then at the end, you have a conversion experience on your deathbed. There is the debate of if you'll still die and go to heaven because of all the other things you've done. The focus is on salvation and who is condemned and who is promised eternal life.

Another perspective on the story might be to look at who Jesus is in this text and what he does. The story is more about him than it is about humanity. We already know humans are sinful, constantly messing up and transgressing against God and others. What Jesus does on the cross in his final moments speaks volumes about how God works in all our lives in spite of ourselves.

Jesus had a temptation when he was in the middle of his crucifixion. He could have very easily pulled the power card and extricated himself from the situation. Yet he endured the taunting of the rulers, the soldiers, and the other criminal who derided him. He even forgave them, which does not settle a score evenly and rarely means the forgiver will receive anything in return.

Yet he took it a step further with the other criminal. For all we know, this criminal could have been trying to test Jesus a little further or even made sure his future was secure. There's no development to the criminal except for the fact he knows he deserves his punishment and he has been righteously sentenced.

Jesus focuses though on saving this man. He doesn't exempt him from death or suffering. He doesn't offer this criminal anything tangible as he dies upon the cross. Jesus instead says he will be with him in Paradise today.

I've often wondered why we jump to the idea of heaven is what was awaiting this man in death. Jesus doesn't elaborate or describe Paradise. He says you will be with me today.

Perhaps when we read this text we might want to look at this life instead of the one we think we will find when we die. When Jesus speaks to the criminal, he sees someone who has committed a crime or maybe several crimes. He knows the criminal has sinned and messed up. The criminal's penalty will be his death, his vulnerable body exposed to the elements in a manner meant to induce shame. And yet Jesus says he will be with him as they hang upon their respective crosses together.

What if in this text Jesus is telling us he knows we are sinners, those who have messed up and keep messing up? However, he still loves us and wants us to belong to him. He claims us even though we haven't earned or done anything to merit being claimed by him.

Today is our Paradise. Our Lord has claimed us even though we are guilty of transgressions in our sinful state. He has claimed us with a force more powerful than anything we could imagine. His "saving" us isn't about working out our list of righteous deeds or our earning jewels for our crowns. He is the one who saves and the gift he gives us is grace, favor we have not earned or deserved. And yet he gives it to us because he loves us so much.

How have you heard the story of the two criminals taught? What ideas or memories do you have when it comes to the word “saved?” Why do you think it is important to think of Paradise as a place we can experience today? Why do you think Jesus wants us to hear his words: “You will be with me today in Paradise?” not just when we die, but in the here and the now? What are the human understandings of the word “saved” and how is that different from God’s notion of “saving?”

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