

SERMON: **Words to Live By: "Today you will be with me in Paradise"**
TEXT: Luke 23:32, 39-43

"The saddest part is that we won't see him in heaven."

These were the words of a young woman regarding a friend of hers who had been killed in a car accident. The young man who died was not a church-goer, and he remained quiet whenever his other friends were talking about their Christian faith. Or maybe he had shared with them that he wasn't interested in church or that he didn't share their beliefs. Whatever he did or didn't do, whatever he said or didn't say, his friend assumed that he did not believe in Jesus and thus, would not go to heaven.

There are many denominations that teach this, and many Christians who stand firm in this belief. Their primary basis for it comes from the Gospel of John, Chapter 3, verse 16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that *everyone who believes in him* may not perish, but may have eternal life." The emphasis is on "everyone who believes in him."

Other denominations and individual believers such as myself, have just as much love and appreciation for John 3:16. But we would put the emphasis on the first part of the verse: "For God so loved *the world*." If God really loves the whole world - or more accurately, all of creation - then why would God limit the gift of eternal life to only those who say they believe? After all, what a person claims to believe may be different from what they feel in their heart and could also change due to new experiences or relationships. Furthermore, there are so many people in the world who don't have the opportunity to believe because they have never heard of Jesus. And there are Christians who say they believe in Jesus, but they don't follow his command to "love your neighbor as yourself." Is the expression of belief all that's necessary?

Anyway, this discussion about who deserves heaven often leads to the phenomenon known as the "eleventh hour confession." That young woman I mentioned earlier had no way of knowing what happened between God and her friend in the

moment or in the milliseconds before his death. How do we know that the young man didn't see Jesus or *meet* him at that moment? How does anyone know that he wasn't moved to ask, "Jesus, remember me"? We don't know. And it is not for us to judge.

One of the criminals crucified with Jesus had an encounter with him that led to an eleventh hour confession. Let's hear those verses again from the Gospel of Luke: "One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other [criminal] rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' [Jesus] replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'"

I think our problem with the eleventh hour confession is that we assume people will take advantage of it. That they will live the way they want to live, thumbing their nose at God's laws and society's laws, sinning with wild abandon, because they know they can be saved in their final moments.

On the other hand, if you were ever going to be honest with yourself, if you were ever going to allow your hard heart to be softened, wouldn't the days or the moments before your death be the time to finally do it? When you're dying, your power is gone, your greed is pointless, and your claims of righteousness won't bring you back to life.

Pastor and author Adam Hamilton wrote this about the criminals crucified with Jesus. "They were dying terrible deaths, and yet one of them joined the crowd in mocking the man dying between them. But as Jesus prayed for the very people crucifying and mocking him, one of the thieves listened and was both amazed and ashamed. Somehow the blinders came off, and he

was able to see that this [Jesus] was no ordinary criminal. He understood something of the essence of Jesus.... Jesus, hanging on the cross, was still seeking to save those who were lost. This man did not understand theology. He did not know Scripture. He had not recited a creed. He had not joined a church or been baptized. He had not had the chance to do anything righteous or to clean up his life. He was hanging on the cross for his crimes when, at some very simple level, he caught the vision of Jesus' kingdom and asked if he might become part of it; and that was enough." (Adam Hamilton, *24 Hours That Changed the World*, 2009, Abingdon Press)

Jesus, remember me.

I think our fear of dying is not as much about where we will end up, but about the pain of it. Both the physical pain and, perhaps even more, the emotional pain. The loneliness. The worry for family members. The loss of future hopes and dreams. The regret for wrongs never made right or relationships never reconciled.

When the pain was overwhelming, when the fear was ever-growing, when all hope was gone, Jesus promised, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." **Today** - soon. **You will be with me** - you are not alone; we are on this journey together. **In Paradise** - a place of eternal light and love, more wonderful than you could ever imagine. With those words, the one who was lost became found. Though he would still die, his life was saved in so many ways.

As the other criminal mocked, "Save yourself and us!" Jesus did just that. He saved the repentant criminal and extended that salvation to all of us. "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

One question remains. How are these dying words of Jesus WORDS TO LIVE BY for us? In a word: hope. It is important to remember that there is hope for anyone and everyone and the world. There is hope up to the eleventh hour and beyond. Sharing hope, not judgment - that is our task. And we must never give up

on anyone, as Jesus never gave up on the one dying beside him: the criminal, the wretched one, the thug.

Furthermore, if we believe in eternal life, we need to start living it today. Not in the sense of following all the rules to make sure we qualify. But in the sense of sharing the marks of eternity: the hope, the light, and the unending love of our gracious and merciful Creator. **Today** and everyday, in our words and in our actions, we can provide a preview of Paradise. Loving the unlovable. Welcoming the outcast. Reaching out to those on the margins. Seeing those who are invisible. Hearing those who have no voice. Listening to understand. Wiping away tears. easing pain. Feeding the hungry. Clothing the naked. Visiting those who are sick or in prison. Such life-giving actions give the assurance of eternal life, as Jesus assured the criminal. "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

As we come to the table to share in the body and blood of Jesus, may we be reminded that as the church, we are the Body

of Christ in the world. May our love reach up to the Lord and out to all people. And may we live by the words of our dying Lord, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

To the glory of God!

AMEN.