

Final Words: "Today you will be with me in Paradise"

Luke 23:32, 39-43

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Do you find yourself watching "Judge Judy," "The People's Court," "Judge Joe Brown," "Judge Mathis," or "Judge Alex" on TV? Have you memorized the twenty years of "Law and Order" re-runs?

Do you find the daily reports of the Oscar Pistorius trial in South Africa compelling?

Human beings have been fascinated with legal proceedings since the beginning. Moses organized "small claim courts" for the tribes of Israel to be held in public 3,500 years ago. Civil proceedings were held at the gates of the ancient city of Jerusalem so all could see and hear as they came and went.

We are still fascinated with the legal system. And we should be. The public administration of justice has everything to do with who we are as a people. The courts provide the opportunity for the truth to be told, for society to be protected from criminals, for the powerless to have a voice, for the powerful and privileged to be held accountable.

Verdicts can change societies. The Supreme Court "Brown vs. the Board of Education" decision in 1954 ending legalized racial discrimination in public education changed America.

The system isn't perfect. In our litigious society, all-too-many use the courts for profit instead of justice. "While people of color make up about 30% of the United States' population, they account for 60% of those imprisoned." (Center for American Progress). Since 1973, over 140 convicted murderers on death row have been exonerated and freed (Death Penalty Information Center). That statistic is a testament to a system with enough flaws that we should either never use the death penalty or it is proof that a very human system works, albeit slowly.

One way or the other, along with the need to constantly improve it, we wouldn't trade our legal system for any in the world. It is no wonder we pay so much attention to trials, convictions and verdicts.

Fascinating then, isn't it, that at Jesus' trial and execution, it is a criminal condemned to death who gets the verdict right.

Jesus is crucified between two "criminals" (Luke) or "bandits" (Matthew 27:38 and Mark 15:27). The gospel writers felt this fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy "...and he was numbered with the transgressors" (53:12).

Their crimes are not described in the Bible but that they are receiving capital punishment, and two of the gospels call them "bandits." Roman crucifixion was used almost entirely for those guilty of sedition or rebellion against the Empire.

In the first century, many Jews yearned for the coming of a "messiah" (king) to lead a war against the Romans. On Golgotha, Jesus is convicted of sedition and labeled "King of the Jews" by the Romans. In the gospels Matthew and Mark, the two bandits mock Jesus and scorn him as a failure as a revolutionary while they are hanging from their own crosses.

In Luke's version of the story, only one of the criminals mocks Jesus. The other does something completely unexpected. He warns his compatriot "do you not fear God?" He accepts responsibility for his crimes, saying "...we are getting what we deserve..." Then, in effect, he confesses Jesus as the true messiah; "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

In response, Jesus promises him much more than he had asked; "Today you will be with me in paradise." The term refers to the lodging place of the righteous dead prior to the resurrection at the end of time.

Adam Hamilton, in our Lenten Study Book "Final Words from the Cross" (Abingdon 2013) reminds us that from its Persian roots, the word "paradise" refers to a "walled garden" and specifically the "king's garden." The word reminds us of the Garden of Eden in the book of Genesis, which was a metaphor for the intended state of relationship with God, a wholeness in God's presence; "a peace that passes all understanding" (Philippians 4:7).

This Lenten season, we will consider the last words spoken by Jesus on the day of his death. Lent is the forty day “minus Sundays” season of the church year when we remember Jesus’ forty days of temptation and testing in the desert in preparation for his ministry. As we prepare ourselves for Palm Sunday, Holy Week and Easter, we will consider the last words in the drama of the cross as they relate to our own spiritual journey. How we come to grips with the reality of death and our eternal destiny is a huge part of that journey toward spiritual wholeness.

A scholar once suggested that the Bible has three central messages, sometimes in tension with each other: “judgment” (you are going to get what you deserve); “mercy” (you are not going to get what you deserve); and “grace”(you are going to get what you don’t deserve, namely God’s love and forgiveness).

In Luke, the confessing bandit gets grace, more than he asked for. He is not magically taken off of his cross; he still has to face the consequences of his actions here on earth. But even as he dies, he is promised eternal peace in the next life because of his faith in Jesus. This too, is in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy “for he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors” (53:12). Jesus’ redemption is not just in the future but it is here and now even for those despised by the world.

We are left with no explanation as to why, of all people this criminal in Luke's gospel, while dying on his own cross, would have the clarity to see who Jesus really was. Unless he overheard Jesus' words to those crucifying him spoken just before; "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do..." (Luke 23:34). In his dying state could this bandit have come to realize the divine nature of what he had just witnessed?

A Roman governor and the Sanhedrin of Israel's' most important religious leaders find Jesus guilty of a crime he didn't commit. Only the criminal dying next to Jesus delivers the correct verdict; "I am the one guilty here not you, remember me forever Holy One of God."

Maybe it was at that moment that the believing revolutionary knew that the world would only truly change when love and forgiveness reign in the human heart.

Two of the most gracious and dedicated persons to serve this church, Jan Jenschky and Erv Austin have died in the last few weeks. On Monday, I visited my father Calvin Bollwinkel in a North Sacramento nursing home as he takes a new step in his life with cancer. On Tuesday, we received word that one of my best friends in life, Art Kess, passed away from his cancer; I will be speaking at his memorial service this Thursday.

Maybe it's my age or the circumstance of my profession, but the reality of death hangs close to me these days. My hunch is that there a number here this morning who know what I mean.

For the living, the impact of physical death is not nearly as real as the enormity of loss, and my hunch is that there are many here this morning who know that truth much more than I.

For all of our traditions and beliefs, what lies on the next side of this life remains a mystery in large part. But on the cross, we get to hear Jesus' own image of heaven. He calls it "paradise." Whether a place or state of being, it is a return to the intended state of relationship with God, a wholeness in God's presence; "a peace that passes all understanding" (Philippians 4:7).

I take great comfort in that promise in times like these; but, more than that, if Jesus would invite a criminal with him into paradise, how much more so you and me?

Amen.