

Outcasts: Loving the Cynic
Sermon 8-6-17
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Luke 23:39-43

³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴²Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Message:

In our passage today, we see one of the criminals on the cross have a last minute confession. In February of 2013, CNN collected stories from Reddit asking doctors and nurses if they had ever heard a deathbed confession. I'd like to share a few of them. Sweetexasmarty wrote, "In nursing school a lady in her mid-40s came in after a car accident. She needed surgery, and before she went in she made me promise to tell her husband that she had a child before she met him and put it up for adoption and should her son ever come looking for her to let him know she was sorry and loved him every day. She lived and I hope she got to tell him that herself." Another confession story comes from mayaseye, "When I first started as a 911 dispatcher I had a call come in and all that the person said was 'Tell them I'm sorry,' and hung up. I knew right away what we were going to find when we got there. It was the worst feeling. I just felt so dirty that I was the last one to talk to this guy, and no matter how fast we sent help it didn't matter it was just too late. So I guess he was confessing, but it just made me feel icky." One of the more interesting ones, maybe even funny, came from user buddynach0, "My grandma went a little loopy before she went, but she left a vm for her best friend in the last days along the lines of 'Maggie, it's Deborah. I'm dying, and it's a lot of fun! Call me back!'" Here is the last confession from user CopWithoutVest, "A call had come out of a shooting that had just occurred. It was in a neighboring division, but we were close so we decided to go. We were the first unit and there is a guy, shot right in the forehead walking back and forth. He is on his cell phone screaming and crying and asking his mother to please forgive him for everything he has done because he got shot and was going to die." It's interesting what people will say before they die or what they feel is most important to express.

In our passage today, the second criminal, in defense of Jesus says to the first criminal, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” The second criminal seems to recognize that he is getting what he deserves in this death on the cross. In a roundabout way, he is confessing to Jesus that he knows he is guilty. And then asks for Jesus to remember him. And Jesus responds with grace telling him that he will be with Him in paradise. It’s not too late to confess our wrongs to God. It’s not too late to receive salvation. It’s not too late to believe. As this second criminal on the cross experiences. In his last breaths, he receives the forgiveness of Christ and experiences salvation. For some of us though, it can feel like the weight of the world is on our shoulders because of things that we’ve done in the past. Like our confessions previously mentioned, we can carry these guilty and wrongful choices for a lifetime. And it’s only when life seems fragile, that we open ourselves up to releasing these wrongful actions from our conscience. It’s bittersweet. On the one hand, it comes as great relief that it doesn’t matter when we confess our sins, we will receive grace and forgiveness. On the other hand, it also begs the question, “What would have happened if this criminal on the cross would have confessed his sins sooner in life? Before things got so bad?” Maybe that’s the question that many of us wrestle with. “If I just would have told this person sooner or admitted to my guilt, then (blank) wouldn’t have happened.” But we can spin our wheels forever wondering what could have been instead of living in the newness of life that we have in Christ going forward. While this criminal has little life left, he can die with some peace knowing that he will join Christ in his Kingdom.

While this is good for us to remember that it is not too late for Christ’s salvation and to take solace in this criminal’s confession, I want to turn our attention to the first criminal. What happened to the first criminal? He mocks Jesus in verse 39, “³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’” This inspires the second criminals defense of Jesus and confession. But there is no indication in the text what happens to the first criminal. And the first criminal is not the first to mock Jesus. The people mock Him. The soldiers mock Him. So there are cynics both in the crowd and on the cross. Maybe you’ve experienced a few them in our day and age. “Jesus isn’t real. He’s a figment of your imagination. Like Santa Claus.” “It’s illogical to believe in the supreme being of God because you can’t prove his existence.” “It’s naïve and irrational to believe in a God who controls all and is in all. It doesn’t make any sense.” “If God existed, then why didn’t he save (blank).” You’ve heard many variations of these arguments. That God or Jesus can’t possibly exist. Like the first criminal on the cross, many of these cynics are

saying, “Prove it! If Jesus exists, have Jesus use his supernatural powers.” “Come down from the cross.”

So what do we do with these people? These cynics? How should we respond? There are many possible responses. The way many have responded over the past century is through reason. To those Jesus haters out there, the believers should respond with sound arguments. That if each believer has a list of scriptures to quote and a logical argument, that they will convince a non-believer to believe. We’ve created a whole field of study around this idea. It’s called “Christian Apologetics.” Through historical study and corroborating ancient documents, we can then prove that Jesus and therefore, God exists. If you only know enough information, you can convince the doubters around you that Jesus/God is real. Here’s the problem, it’s not realistic that every one of you can get a seminary education. Nor do many of you want to. And even as someone who has a seminary education, I still don’t have enough tools at my disposal, enough knowledge, to rationally prove that God is real. Because at the heart of our faith, it is irrational. It’s illogical to believe in a supreme being that saves all from the destruction of their sins. But it doesn’t mean it isn’t real.

Let me give you a personal example (Go off script). When I was in Brazil for the 2014 World Cup, my 3 American friends and I established a friendship with some Brazilians. One of our last evenings with them, we went to Pizzeria for dinner. I’m not sure how we landed on the topic, but we began talking about faith. And this one Brazilian went on-and-on telling us why he didn’t believe in God. He was a smart guy. He was quoting lots of philosophers from the Enlightenment period. Like Rene Descartes, Voltaire and David Hume, if you know any of them. One could be intimidated by his arguments. His sister was conversing with one of my friends on the same topic. And bless his heart, he was trying to use typical evangelism arguments. That he believed that those who do not choose to believe will suffer in hell. And that it is in the best interest of each person to receive Christ’s salvation and repent of their sins. Well...she wasn’t buying it either and may have even pushed her further away from faith. This highly educated Brazilian kept going on-and-on mocking our faith. I knew that a rational argument wasn’t going to work. I knew that it would only fuel his arguments all the more. I knew that I didn’t have the same stamina to out-argue him and rationalize him into submission. I stopped him for a moment and said, “Let me asking you something, have you ever experienced forgiveness?” His bullish and proud posture changed as he responded sincerely, “Yeah...my mom.” And I responded, “Yeah...and at the heart of Christianity, that’s what our faith is about. It’s about being forgiven for things that we cannot forgive ourselves.” And it stopped him in his tracks. He seized making any more rational arguments against Christianity. And even changed the topic. (return to the script). What do you think happened there? I

could have gone toe-to-toe slinging back arguments, but thanks to the movement of the Holy Spirit, I knew that it would only further entrench or harden his position. I needed to speak to the heart.

Folks, having all the information and logic in the world to convince someone to believe will not be enough. From my experience, cynics are usually people who have been hurt. They come up with a bunch of fancy and rehearsed arguments to protect themselves from being further hurt. They want to avoid pain. Like the thief on the cross, they want to be relieved of their pain and so they cry out “Prove yourself God.” The people in the crowd in their pain and suffering cry out “Prove yourself God.” And especially the outcasts in our community who have not been welcomed by Christ-believers and the church, cry-out “Prove yourself God.” And quite frankly, they often have some legitimate grievances in the church. But instead of opening their hearts to healing and wholeness, it’s easier to come up with arguments as to why they shouldn’t believe in God. And so the way to belief is not to come up with a rationalized argument because a rationalized argument doesn’t reach deep enough. It stays on the surface and continues to keep the pain distant from anything real. From any real healing and restoration. And so our task is to speak to the matters of the heart. I could probably quote many stories where Jesus spoke to matters of the heart more than to the intellect. And it was the gentle touch to the heart the healed and brought one into loving relationship with Him. Read the gospels, they are countless.

Lastly, what is it like for these bystanders? These people watching this conversation between the criminals and Jesus. They silently watch this interaction. And there are people silently watching our actions in our everyday life. They silently watch our interactions on Facebook. They silently watch as we converse with the mail man outside. They silently watch us in the supermarket. What he or she does. They may be searching too for something more. They too may be searching for love and grace in their life. They too may long for forgiveness from their choices. But if we cannot show the cynic love and grace, what will the bystanders think? If we engage in heated discussions in “defending our faith,” what kind of witness is that? Sometimes when another critiques our faith in Jesus, it can feel like a personal attack. But, as I was often reminded of in my time in chaplaincy, their anger often has more to do with them than with me. They may sling insults, but it is often coming from their own pain. They are acting out of their own pain. And so we have to see beyond the insults and discern what’s going on in their heart. Not only does the cynic require our gentle, tender and loving touch, but the bystanders need to witness that love and grace too.

So as you think about outcasts, many of them are like the first criminal on the cross. They are cynical of Jesus. They are cynical because they’ve been hurt. The thief on the cross is hurting and therefore is looking for the easy way out.

When if that criminal is going to receive forgiveness it requires death. Death to the self. Death to his past. Death to his guilt. The second criminal recognizes this. That it requires him to let the old him pass away so that he can be reborn with Christ. To be with Him in paradise. How can we help the cynic die to their former pain? Tap into their heart with tenderness, love and grace. Don't be thrown off by their protective critical arguments. Show them the way to Christ's heart. Show them the path to healing and wholeness. And probably most importantly, pray for them and let God do the work. And as they are able to let their deep-seated pain melt away, they will experience the re-birth in Christ. It's not too late for the first criminal on the cross. Just as it was not too late for the second criminal. And it's not too late for you and me to confess of our sins and ask for God's forgiveness and freedom in our life. Let us testify of that grace and love as we engage with outcasts or cynics in our community. Amen.