

# “One on the Left and One on the Right”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – March 28, 2010*

Palm / Passion Sunday

Psalm 118:1, 21-29

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 23:32-43

“Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” These words come from Jesus while he is on the cross, as two criminals hang beside him, one of the left and one on the right. And yet, we must imagine that Jesus is praying not just for these two individuals, but for a much broader audience: for the Pharisees who had tried to entrap him, for the Romans who had beaten and mocked him, and for the disciples who had abandoned him. He prayed for the past builders of the faith as well as for future generations of followers. He prayed for all those whose sinfulness contributed to his being on the cross, and for all those others who likely would have shown the same fear and disbelief if they had been in Jerusalem that dark day.

There were a lot of witnesses that day – we are told – people watching this unjust crucifixion from a distance. From that distant perspective, they might have the capacity to realize what was happening – that this was the same person they had welcomed as a king just a few days earlier. They may have remembered how Jesus had been tricked and trapped by his enemies – asked to choose between bowing to God or to Caesar; between Sabbath observance or healing the sick. These witnesses may have been present at his mockery of a trial, or watched him carry his cross up the hill called The Skull. They well could have imagined Jesus wanting to get down from the cross and save himself .

Jesus bore the events of this horrible day even though he knew that he could have waved it all off with a whisper. He could have said, “if one more person spits on me, or insults me, or pokes me – I will destroy them all.”<sup>1</sup> His plan – regardless of his Father’s will – could have been self-preservation. But, as the old spiritual says: “He never said a mumblin’ word.”

My sophomore year in high school, there was a new soccer coach. He was from Argentina and – having come to coach in Kentucky – introduced a lot of new things. We had different training methods, different terminology and different positions on the field. But, one thing that I remember most vividly is the new way that we were told to defense free kicks.

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<sup>1</sup> Jerry Goebel, “The Man in the Middle”

For part of that season, I played the position of sweeper, which serves as the final defender in front of the goalie. One of the sweeper's responsibilities was forming a wall; grabbing two other defensemen and standing next to each other, hopefully blocking a direct kick into the goal. Up until that season, we had always formed a wall by locking arms, meaning that – as the player in the middle – I couldn't move unless my teammates moved. That year, though, our new coach instructed us to stand shoulder-to-shoulder, freeing our hands so that we could provide ourselves some welcome protection.

Of course, this new strategy also gave us a new freedom; all three human targets now had the choice of ducking out of the way when the ball was kicked in their direction. It was a decision of either taking one for the team or avoiding the ball in the interest of self-preservation. In one game, I recall, a teammate saved a possible goal with his face and received not only the respect of his coach but a bloody nose in return.

On Good Friday, two men hang only a short distance apart, with Jesus in the middle; both representing the decision that each of us must face. One man mocks Jesus and condemns the faithful. All of his demands are self-centered. He tempts Jesus with the option of saving them all, meaning that this criminal would not need to make a decision on faith. The man on the other side acknowledges his sin and comes to the defense of Jesus. He recognizes that Jesus does not deserve the mocking he endured, while they – as true criminals – do.

At other points in Luke's gospel, Jesus has offered his thoughts on this decision about salvation. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, one brother confesses his misdoings and comes back home to the father with humble contrition. He admits that his actions have been criminal, and that he deserves nothing from his father, not even the job as a servant that he is seeking. The second brother refuses to believe that the father's pardon should be for everyone, denying also his own need to be forgiven. He joins in with those others who likely have been mocking his father for having given away a fortune to a good-for-nothing son. In the eyes of the resentful brother, the father refused to save himself.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus describes a good neighbor as one who is willing to put aside selfish concerns in order to show compassion to another. After the others have passed by an injured man on the roadside, it is the least likely of all who offers aid. Though Jesus does not tell us anything else about this "Good Samaritan," we can see in him empathy for the less fortunate. "That could have been me in the ditch," he may have thought, which is more than the Jewish passers-by would allow themselves to imagine. "Love your neighbor as yourself," Jesus goes on to say, and that is how the kingdom of heaven will come.

But, when Jesus speaks to the criminal hanging next to him – the one who came to the defense of Jesus – there is no mention of the kingdom of heaven; instead, Jesus talks about paradise. This is a rare thing; actually, it's the only time in any of the four gospels that this word is used. Jesus promises the repentant criminal that they would be together in paradise that very day. Paradise is a park, a natural garden, the same word that is used to describe the Garden of Eden. And so, it is not only an afterlife, and not just a beautiful and bucolic setting, it is also the place where God walks among and talks with His beloved created ones.

The forgiveness that Jesus offers from the cross was not only for one criminal, not only for these two criminals, but for all criminals. We tend to think of a criminal as being someone convicted and sentenced for a crime, but it really means anyone who has done evil. Jesus' forgiveness extends to all of those who surround him, but it doesn't mean that everyone accepts it: Judas did not, most of the Jewish leaders did not, and even Peter almost did not.

Some accept the offer of forgiveness, others do not. And the defining characteristic between those who receive Christ's mercy and those who do not seems to be thinking not only of themselves, but of others. This we see in the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan and the remorseful sinner at Jesus' side. In addition to these exemplars, though, we also see the self-sacrifice of Jesus himself as our ultimate model. When people were hungry, he offered them food; when they were sick, he offered them healing; and when they were dying and alone, he offered them companionship and a home.

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Do we forgive others as the Lord has forgiven us? Do we recognize that although each of us is a criminal – one who had done evil deeds – Jesus has forgiven us completely? Can we recall the nature of Christ's self-sacrifice, even at those times when we feel inclined to only look out for ourselves?

This is the daily decision that each of us face; self-centeredness or giving of ourselves to others: giving our compassion, offering also our forgiveness. Our arms are not locked with anyone else; when the ball is kicked our way, it is up to us to make the choice – choosing whether or not to accept God's mercy. And, the outcome of our decision, Jesus says, is tangible; it makes a difference for us today – and all the rest of our days. AMEN.