

Jesus, Remember Me

I speak to you in the name of He who Is, who Was and who Is to come. Amen PBS

Today is the last Sunday in the Christian Calendar. Today is known as Christ the King Sunday or the Reign of Christ.

Today is the day when we total up all our sins over the past year and ask for forgiveness. No, not really. Today is when we read the stories of Jesus and sum up his life. A neat and tidy package of the past before we move into the beginning of the Christian Calendar, Advent.

Each year the focus of the Reign of Christ is different. For Year C the focus is on, ironically, the last day of Jesus' life. Those horrifying moments when he had been nailed to the cross between two criminals. He was a laughingstock. He was spit on, dressed in royal purple, a crown of thorns shoved on his head and a sign nailed above him that read "This is the King of the Jews" (Luke 23.34, NRSV) in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek.

The soldiers mocked him. He was whipped and beaten as he carried the cross, or a part of it, through town. Once he was securely nailed to the cross "One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" (Luke 23.39, NRSV) The nerve of him! In one breath he's mocking Jesus and in the next breath he's demanding to be saved. Things like that infuriate me. The injustice of that makes my blood boil.

Unlike Jesus, the two criminals were guilty of their crimes. They were thieves. The first thief speaks as though he is part of the damning crowd. The second thief says, "And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." (Luke 23.41, NRSV)

Getting what you deserve for doing something wrong. A term known as Poetic Justice. When you see someone getting their just desserts. When someone steals an ice cream cone from a child, then drops it before it can be eaten: poetic justice.

When we were children, life seemed so much simpler. If someone takes a toy that we are playing with, we may cry or respond in a hurt way. And eventually we forgive. Hopefully the person who took the toy returns it and apologizes. A simple hurt, fixed with a simple apology. If only all hurts were forgiven so easily.

Have any of you ever harmed someone, either intentionally or unintentionally? I know I have done both. It doesn't feel good to make someone feel bad, does it? And so in order to restore right relationship, what do we do?

We apologise.

And then all is made well and we are forgiven, right?

Not necessarily.

Has anyone ever asked you for forgiveness and you've not been able to grant it?

Have you ever wanted/demanded/needed someone to apologize for something they did?

Forgiveness is a powerful thing. It can often be seen that to forgive someone is to give them a free pass. You did something to hurt me, and I forgive you.

Then "POOF" all is now well and I can go and do what I did again because I know you are going to forgive me.

Isn't that how it is with God? Let us confess our sins, confident in God's forgiveness?

No. Simply said. NO.

God forgives unconditionally. God loves unconditionally.

We are called to do the same. Yet, sometimes, holding onto that hurt, can feel so good. I'm not going to forgive that person because as long as I refuse to forgive them, I can no longer be hurt. Right? I hold the power within me to choose to hate them. Right?

Wrong.

Refusing to forgive is giving them power. The Reverend Nadia Bolz-Weber a Lutheran Pastor in the United States likens forgiveness to releasing a chain that connects you to the person who hurt you. She asks "what if forgiveness is wielding bolt cutters and snapping the chain that connects us". Think about that...when someone does something that harms us we become linked through the harm. When we choose to forgive, and yes, forgiveness is a choice, we break that chain.

When a wrong is done, a chain is attached to the person who did the harm and the person who has been harmed. A powerful image, isn't it? You hurt me and I refuse to forgive you. While it may not matter to you how much you have hurt me, with my refusal to forgive you we are connected. We are CHAINED to each other. If I want to be free of this chain I need to forgive you.

What if I can't? What if I've been connected to this hurt and anger and possibly even hatred toward you that I cannot let this go?

What if I do let go, I do forgive you. Does that mean that you get away without repercussion? Does that mean I am weak in forgiving you? If I cut that chain that connects us, what happens? Bolz-Weber goes on to say "forgiveness is about being a freedom fighter, and free people are dangerous people. They aren't controlled by the past, they laugh more, see more beauty, are not easily offended. Free people are unafraid to speak truth to stupid". (Forgive Assholes, from Makers: Have a Little Faith video series)

Forgiveness takes tremendous strength. And provides tremendous freedom. Imagine being free of the hatred that has weighed you down. Imagine the weight from that chain lifted and left behind in the dust! Freedom!

Jesus is hanging on the cross between two thieves. Remember, one has both taunted Jesus and asked to be saved. "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself **and us!**" (Luke 23.39, NRSV) He wants to be part of the crowd, the popular kids, yet is still afraid that maybe, just maybe, this guy is the real deal. He IS the Messiah.

The second thief on the other side of Jesus, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" (Luke 23.40)

In more modern language he's saying "Dude, seriously? You're mocking the guy that can literally save your life. You know that stole that bread. I know I stole that cup. We are both guilty and here's this guy. He hasn't stolen anything. He hasn't done ANYTHING wrong. Yet he's up here with us.

The second thief then turns to Jesus and begs forgiveness. He doesn't know where he is going after he dies, although he likely has a fairly good idea. He said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." (Luke 23.42, NRSV) In that moment he throws himself at Jesus' mercy and acknowledges that Jesus IS the son of God. He asks, not for salvation, but for forgiveness and remembrance.

Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom. (sing)

Jesus reply to the second thief, is the same as his reply to the first thief. To all those who have gathered to gawk at the spectacle before them; To the soldiers, the religious leaders, the bloodthirsty crowd; Jesus says "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23.43, NRSV)

Nelson Mandela was 44 years old when he was arrested and jailed in South Africa. He was jailed for 27 years. During that time he was treated poorly. Early in his incarceration he was told to dig a grave in the yard that would fit him. He was then told to lay down in the grave and the guards urinated on him. He spent many of those first years angry...why wouldn't he?

His cell on Robben Island was 7 feet by 8 feet with a straw mat on which to sleep. Conditions were deplorable for black inmates. White guards tormented the inmates. He spent 18 years in that tiny cell on Robben Island. He was released from prison in 1990 and was immediately involved with political systems, and the end of apartheid.

Madiba (Xhosa word for Father or Daddy) was elected President on 27 April 1994. When he was asked to provide a guest list for the Inauguration, one of the guests invited Christo Brand, one of his prison guards while he was at Robben Island. When he was asked about this strange choice of inviting one who guarded him in prison, to be present as his inauguration he replied "As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison." (Nelson Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom)

Back to today's gospel.

Remember, Jesus has been surrounded by those who would do him harm. He has been betrayed repeatedly. He knew the time would come when he would have to give up his life.

He could have said no.
He tried to say no.
And then he said yes.

Jesus, in the beginning of the scene in the Gospel today implores God, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23.34, NRSV)

It takes courage to say and do that.
That's a lot of courage to give.

It takes unconditional love to say and do that.
That's a lot of love to give.

To a crowd of people who are literally baying for his blood.
For a group of apostles who are about to abandon him.
For a kangaroo court of officials.
For a bunch of religious leaders.
For Pilate, who is an unwitting participant.
For all those who are watching from afar, afraid to get involved.

Jesus forgives.
God forgives.
Spirit forgives.

Could it be that forgiveness is as much, if not MORE for you then it is for the one you forgive?

If forgiveness is about freedom, why wouldn't we do it? Why shouldn't we do it?

Forgive, and set yourself free.

As we say farewell to Year C and prepare with great anticipation for Year A, let this year be the year when we choose to forgive. The year when we choose to be free.

Remember, free people are dangerous people.

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Reign of Christ "C"
Jeremiah 23.33-46
Luke 1.68-79 (Song of Simeon)
Colossians 1.11-20
Luke 23.33-43