

I.N.I.

Fifth Sunday in Lent
Luke 23:39-43
March 18, 2018

In Christ Jesus, who promises us a home in Paradise, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Last month at the mall they had some quite large displays of every U. S. President. I spent one afternoon browsing through them and found out some very interesting, little known historical facts. One was about President Chester A. Arthur. He was the 21st president of the United States. He took over when President James Garfield was assassinated after only six months in office in 1881. His career took an ironic twist when he inherited the presidency. You see, no one expected him to ever be president. He was only put on the ticket to heal a split in the Republican Party. Even though Arthur had been a Republican for years, the previous president—Rutherford B. Hayes, also a Republican—had fired him from his job as the collector of customs in New York City. That was the richest government job in America at that time, and it was considered to be a mess of corruption. Arthur made a lot of money there. He hired a lot of Republican cronies to unnecessary, well-paying jobs. So when the new president died, many people thought the best thing Arthur could do for America would be to resign.

However, a young woman named Julia Sands wrote him a series of letters calling on him to defy everyone's expectations and be a good president. Arthur took her letters to heart and persuaded Congress to pass reform legislation that completely changed his old job as collector of customs, and then he vigorously enforced that legislation. He shocked friend and foe alike by permanently changing the way the American government ran in regard to customs and cronyism.

This morning, we have before us another man whose words would've shocked anyone who knew him. Those words are today's irony of the passion:

DON'T YOU FEAR GOD?

Unlike the story of President Arthur, the account of the criminal who said these words is well-known, even though we don't actually know his name. The irony is that these words were spoken by a murderer and thief: **Don't you fear God?**

I. A DYING CRIMINAL CAME TO FAITH ON A CROSS.

Pilate finally condemned Jesus to die, and the Roman soldiers marched Him out to Calvary. Crucifixions required serious logistical support. You needed poles, cross beams, nails, and ropes. You needed soldiers to guard the prisoners and to keep order, because crowds gathered to watch crucifixions. So ordinarily there was a delay between the time when the sentence was passed and when it was finally carried out, but the Jewish leaders wanted Jesus dead that day. More importantly, God prophesied that His Son would die during the Passover, so Jesus was taken immediately to the cross. On that day there were two other criminals in prison awaiting execution. They also were

crucified with Jesus and what a blessing it was for one of them.

As soon as Jesus was nailed to the cross, His enemies began to mock Him. **"IF YOU ARE THE CHRIST, SAVE YOURSELF!"** We are told that both of these criminals joined in. In our sermon text from Luke we read that they even echoed the words of the Jewish leaders: **"AREN'T YOU THE MESSIAH? SAVE YOURSELF AND US!"** Now you may have noticed that Luke says one criminal said that, but Matthew and Mark tell us that *both* criminals mocked Jesus. So at the start, both men were making fun of Jesus, saying things like this. What better way to mock Jesus than to throw His own words back in His face? "Come on, Christ! Use that miraculous power of yours and save yourself and us!"

Jesus was the Christ, the promised Savior of Israel, and He could have come down from that cross. The reason He didn't was to save sinners like those men who were dying with Him.

What kind of men were these criminals? The Bible doesn't tell us exactly what their crimes were, but the Greek words it uses to describe them imply not only stealing but also violence, probably murder. These men were convicted criminals. They deserved the death penalty. But suddenly, one of them asked the other, **"DO YOU NOT EVEN FEAR GOD, SEEING YOU ARE UNDER THE SAME CONDEMNATION? AND WE INDEED JUSTLY, FOR WE RECEIVE THE DUE REWARD OF OUR DEEDS; BUT THIS MAN HAS DONE NOTHING WRONG."**

Don't you fear God? Where did that question come from? If either of these men had feared God, they wouldn't have lived the way they did! But now they were about to die and in the heart of every human being there is a knowledge that God is going to judge us all when we die. So even in a hardened criminal, fear of facing God is not all that unusual.

But the really surprising thing is that that wasn't all this criminal confessed. He trusted in Jesus to take him to heaven when this horrible experience was over. How did he come to know Jesus was his Savior? It is possible that this man had heard of Jesus before. He certainly heard what Jesus' enemies were sarcastically saying to Him about being the Christ, the Savior, the Promised One. He said it too in mockery! He heard Jesus ask His Father to forgive the soldiers who nailed Him to the cross. Yet up until this moment, it doesn't seem like any of it had sunk in. But now, as he was hanging from the cross, the Holy Spirit worked through that Gospel he had heard in the words and actions of Jesus and the words of mockery by the Jewish leaders. Through that Gospel, the Holy Spirit created saving faith in that man's heart. Amazing, right there on the cross, a sinner was saved!

And wonderfully God has done the very same thing for you and me. When you look at this man dying because of robbery and maybe even murder, do we see our self? Or do we think that we aren't the kind of sinner he was? The truth is, we are. We are all sinners from birth. One of greatest lies of our day is that we're all good people by nature. Our culture believes that there's a little good in all of us. If there are really bad people out there, they are limited to child molesters, rapists, drug dealers and mass murderers. But that's all an illusion.

Even though we haven't murdered anyone, we've all hated someone, made fun of someone, or not helped someone in need. We at times thought evil about them that they should get what we think they have coming.

Even though we may never have stolen anything, have we ever been lazy at work? Have we ever been envious of what other people have? Have we ever resented the fact that God was more generous to other people than He was to us? Have we always been content with what we have? To God, those sins of the heart are just as evil as the sins people act out. We are all robbers and murderers at heart. The sin in our hearts contaminates everything we think, say, and do. We are just as guilty before God as these men were, and we deserve the death and the hell that they deserved.

But even as Jesus paid for that criminal's sins so too Jesus paid for all our hatred and murder, for all our greed and robbery, for all our sins. His blood washed it all away. He promises us what He promised that criminal—an eternal Paradise with Him. The Holy Spirit worked through that same Gospel to give us the same faith in our Savior as this dying criminal had.

No one who knew this criminal would've expected him to make this confession. No one who truly understands how sinful our hearts are can fail to be surprised by God's grace when He gave us faith.

II. A DYING CHRISTIAN TRUSTED IN JESUS IN THE FACE OF DEATH.

Crucifixion was a horrible way to die. It was one of the worst forms of execution. Most died by suffocation. As the victims hung there on the cross, they had to push themselves up with their legs to get a full breath of air. As this process continued for hours, sometimes days, the victim became more and more tired. Each breath became harder to take. Each breath brought less and less oxygen. It made the victims have to work harder to draw deeper and faster breaths. Eventually, they reached the point where they couldn't bring in oxygen fast enough, and they died. It was excruciatingly painful. Thirst also tortured them. They were exposed to heat and cold, the sun and dark night. Most of the time it took days to die. That's why Pilate sent soldiers to break their legs so they would die before the Sabbath began. If they couldn't push up with their legs, they suffocated faster. And that's why Pilate was surprised to learn that Jesus was dead after only a few hours on the cross.

The soldiers did break the legs of the other two men. From the moment it all started, this criminal knew what he was in for. Yet in all that pain, he found strength and comfort in Jesus. He didn't ask to be rescued from the cross. He didn't try to bargain with Jesus and promise to turn over a new leaf. He didn't even ask Jesus to spare him some of the pain. He asked only one thing: **"JESUS, REMEMBER ME WHEN YOU COME INTO YOUR KINGDOM."** He asked to go home to heaven.

And Jesus replied, **"ASSUREDLY, I SAY TO YOU, TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE."** That very day he would leave behind all

that pain and suffering, sorrow and sin. He would be with Christ in heaven. And as this new believer, this repentant sinner hung on his own cross, as the hours dragged on and the pain increased, as his legs were broken and his life slipped away, the promise of the Gospel, Paradise with Jesus, kept his faith alive and brought him home. And that same Gospel led him to try to call another sinner to repent while he still had the physical strength. That is perhaps the last irony of this account. Who would ever expect a man in this situation to bear witness for Jesus, to be a missionary for Christ? But God does wonderful, awesome, unexpected things even in the darkest moments.

In this man's final confession, we have a reminder that we too have our crosses. There is so much pain in this life. Many diseases, like cancer, can be as painful as crucifixion. And even if we don't face such horrible deaths, some of us may face pain that seems just as bad—problems in our marriages, children who abandon us, verbal or physical abuse, addiction to drugs, alcohol, or pornography, loneliness, depression. All the pain and sorrow of this life attack us and our faith. God never promised us that we would avoid the crosses He lays on us.

However, He did promise to limit our crosses to no more than what we can bear just like He did when He limited this man's crucifixion to only one day. God did promise to give us the strength we need to endure them. As we continue to meditate on Christ dying for us and as we hear His promise that on the day this life ends we will see him in Paradise, God is working in our hearts. He comforts us with His love. And He even gives us the strength to share our faith in Jesus with those around us. We too can confess to others that we are going home to Jesus. Between now and then, God gives us the strength even in the most painful moments to look to our Savior.

No one who followed Jesus out to Calvary that day expected to hear the confession this criminal gave. He didn't expect to give it himself when he began that last day of his life. But God does miracles. He takes sinners like us and makes us His children. And Jesus promises us through death an entrance into eternal life.

Amen.