

Jeremiah 23:1-6
Psalm 46
Colossians 1:11-20
Luke 23:33-43

Sermon November 24th, 2019

Experiencing God's Forgiveness and Redemption on the Crosses of Our Lives

Like Jesus. Like the two criminals who hung on either side of Jesus. Like the people who stood at the foot of the cross, mocking Jesus. We too face crosses in our lives. Moments where we experience suffering. Moments where we are challenged in life-altering ways. Moments where we wrestle to see God.

Like the people who mocked Jesus from the foot of the cross, we too can get caught up in behaviors and ideologies that result in the suffering of another. Sometimes we struggle to see this suffering that we are inflicting.

In my early adolescence, I struggled with unhealthy behaviors that impacted my loved ones in negative ways. For a long time, I couldn't see the suffering I was inflicting on them. Like the one person hanging on a cross beside Jesus, I just wanted a way down from the cross. Without facing accountability.

Later in my adolescence as I regained control of my life, seeking the help I needed, and healing from some of those past wounds, I started to reshape my beliefs and ideologies about life. What I found interesting about my recovery story and the recovery stories of others I knew was that our ideologies about life often became more rigid. As I reflect on my own reason for this. I realized that since my life was very broken and chaotic, I felt I needed more structure. Unfortunately, in my attempt to become more structured I became more exclusive in my ideologies.

I didn't realize how painful my ideologies were until I came across a friend in seminary who was really hurting and opened up to me about something deeply personal with the hopes of finding support and love from a close friend. Instead, I judged my friend. I told them that a very significant part of who they were was a sin. I could see the hurt in their body language, but it wasn't till years later that I realized how much I hurt this person and our friendship. If I could go back I would.

Have you ever found yourself standing at the foot of the cross, hurting someone you love either with your ideologies or your behaviors? Sometimes, I think of those moments where we get in a heated argument with a friend or partner or spouse. These really nasty words are brewing in our heads. On some level we know saying these words could be damaging to our relationship. Yet, these words slip out in the heat of

the moment. Sometimes in slow motion, while our minds go noooooooooo! What did I just say?

Or have you ever struggled with an addiction? You see that your actions are hurting the people you love, but you struggle to change your behaviors.

In my own experience standing at the foot of the cross, even in some of my darkest moments, I would stumble, but I rarely hit the ground. There was always someone there catching me and lifting me back up again and again. Opening my heart to see things differently. Encouraging me to do things differently. Like those who mocked Jesus, I too heard these words “Forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing”. Even when I wasn’t quite ready to listen.

Well, it was this forgiveness, this grace, that opened my heart to finally listen and then hear the words that the second person hanging on a cross beside Jesus heard. “Today you will be with me in paradise,” or in other words “today you will experience the kingdom of God.”

Like, the second person hanging from a cross sometimes we are the ones hanging beside Jesus. Sometimes we are the ones hanging in the place of Jesus. Jesus invites us to take up our crosses and follow him. Sometimes we are the recipients of suffering.

I have only lived on this planet for 38 years, but I have hung on a lot of crosses in my life. Some self inflicted, but many from external forces. The grief of the death of a loved one. Suffering from chronic pain. Being a victim of bullying. Suffering from a mental health illness. Facing the divorce of my parents. Dealing with estranged relationships due to abuse. Many times, I have found myself living in a cloud of darkness struggling to see the hope God breathes into my life.

Everyone of us here has probably found ourselves hanging from a cross from time to time. Struggling to see God’s hope. Wondering if we will ever experience new life. Maybe even lashing out to Jesus saying “use your power to get me down from here already”.

What is so life giving about this crucifixion story though is what we witness in the second person’s experience while hanging from that cross. Here this person is in the darkest moment of their life. Facing death. Yet, their hearts are opened to see who Jesus really is. They see God’s presence in the midst of their suffering. They are then humbly moved to utter the words “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.” In response, Jesus utters these words “today you will be with me in Paradise.” This person has experienced the promise. This person has experienced redemption at the head of a cross. In the darkest moment of their life.

Like this person, when we are hanging from our cross our hearts too are opened to see God's presence. To see God hanging with us. To feel a special kinship with our creator who suffers with us through Christ Jesus. In response we too, humbled by our suffering, utter these same words, "Jesus, remember me as you live in your kingdom."

After a moment of sheer silence, we hear Jesus whisper to us, "today you will be with me in paradise". Today you will experience redemption and healing. Today the darkness will no longer overcome you.

What inspires me most about Martin Luther's theology is that he believed so deeply that at the cross of Jesus, at the crosses of our lives is where we see God's love come alive for us. Where we meet God. Where we see that like us God too experiences suffering in the life and death of Christ Jesus. Walking with us on this journey. Giving us new life.

Today is Christ the king Sunday. A day where we reflect on Christ's kingship. A king that stands out from the kings, emperors, and leaders we know today. A king that is humble enough to hang from a cross with us and for us. A king who forgives us even in our most broken moments. A king who saves us in our darkest hour. A king who loves us and cares for us in ways that we could never imagine.

This is the king we worship. This is the kingdom we are invited to live in and live out in the world. A kingdom where forgiveness and redemption are experienced wherever we go. Even when we find ourselves standing at the foot of the cross or hanging from the head of it.

Let us pray, redeeming God, as we find ourselves standing at the foot of the crosses of our lives we humbly ask for your grace and forgiveness. When ignorance and darkness blind us from the suffering of others turn our hearts towards you. Helping us become your hands and feet of healing in this world. When we become recipients of suffering, hanging from the cross please remember us as you live in your kingdom. Redeeming us from all suffering. Breathing new life into us. **Amen.**