

What's in a Name? The Thieves on the Cross

July 11, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Luke 23:32-43

[Brief series intro/overview]

So, like last week's story, today's story is one that we find in one way or another in all four gospels. All four gospel writers in their various ways lead us through bits and pieces of the last moments of Jesus's life, and all four of them mention that Jesus was crucified alongside two other men.

Two of the four gospel writers – Matthew and Mark – take the time to underscore the humiliation experienced by Jesus – so much so that even the two men crucified alongside him, who were also experiencing an unconscionable form of execution and they themselves were feeling all of the pain and agony of this torturous death – even *they* – who had nothing left to lose – took part in mocking and deriding Jesus. The gospel writers went to great lengths to underscore just how alone and abandoned Jesus had become. His disciples fled; the crowds of thousands and thousands of excited and hopeful people who we celebrated last week have all faded away into the background, or else turned on him; and not even the lowliest of all criminals want to be associated with him. Matthew takes it a step further when Jesus cries out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” – it seems as if even God himself is nowhere to be seen. Jesus is totally and completely alone.

At least, that's how Matthew and Mark tell it. Luke, though – Luke tells the story a little bit differently. And it is Luke's telling of this story that we are going to explore today.

When the curtain opens on today's story, it's kind of like we are turning on a movie 15 minutes before the end. Most of the story has already been told. Most of the action has already happened and we are at this big, climactic moment. Jesus has been arrested, and tried. Passed back and forth between Pontius Pilate and King Herod, and back to Pilate again; declared innocent and yet allowed to be crucified for Pilate's political gain. He's been flogged, and beaten, and forced to carry his cross – the instrument of his own execution – up the hill to Golgotha. But he was so weak by this point that the Roman soldiers were afraid that he would not make it to Golgotha, so they forced a random guy in the crowd – Simon of Cyrene – to carry Jesus's cross for him.

The whole point of crucifixion in Roman times – and really, all throughout history, was not so much the execution of people (putting dangerous criminals to death), but the *public* execution of people. The government wanted to make an example of them. When a person was crucified, they wanted the crucifixion to be as visible as possible, so that people would be able to see the gruesome humiliation and death and not repeat the same crimes. It was intended to be a very public deterrent.

It would have defeated the purpose of the crucifixion altogether, if Jesus died on his way to the cross. He had to make it there alive, so that people could see his death. Witness his agony. And then make a mental note never to threaten the power and authority of the government again, lest they meet the same end. It was a scare tactic.

So Jesus finally makes it to Golgotha, which is a spot on the hillside literally called “the skull” because it was the place where most executions took place. And as Jesus is hanging on the cross, loads of people are gathered around. We are told that there are “the people” who, evidently are just watching. Then, there are “the leaders” who are scoffing. Muttering under their breaths, “he saved others, but he can’t save himself? He was a fraud, then. It must have been all for show. I used to have so much respect for him. But now? He can’t even save himself.” And then, we have the soldiers and guards, who are quite a bit bolder than everybody else. They come up to him and verbally mock him. “If you are the Son of God, save yourself!”

And this is where our nonames for today enter. The two men who are crucified alongside Jesus.

So, as usual, we don’t know a whole lot about these men. Scripture doesn’t tell us much, except that they were criminals. Robbers. Thieves. And, in contrast to Jesus who had done nothing to deserve the treatment he was getting, these two men were indeed very guilty of their crimes.

We don’t know their names. Part of the punishment for their crimes would have been that they were stripped of everything, from the clothes that they wore, to their dignity, to their very personhood. The fact that they remained nameless was intentional.

But that doesn’t mean that they *never* had names. In a writing called the Gospel according to Nicodemus, which was written around the 4th century AD, the writer gives us names for these two men: Gestas (literally meaning, “to complain” or “to moan”) and Dismas (meaning “sunset” or “death”). Gestas would have been the man hanging to Jesus’s left, and Dismas, to Jesus’s right.

A couple hundred years later, another nonbiblical work was written titled the “Syriac Infancy Narrative” – and in this writing, we see a story that later medieval writers and artists would really latch onto. In this story, the men’s names are Dumachus – the thief to Jesus’s left – and Titus – the thief to his right.

Now remember, this story is just legend. It’s not biblical. But it is fascinating, nonetheless. In this legend, Jesus has just been born, and Mary and Joseph have received word from the angel that they must flee to Egypt to escape King Herod’s murderous cronies. But on their way, they come face-to-face with a band of robbers. Which would have been commonplace for travelers in that day and age. Most of the robbers are asleep when Mary and Joseph and Jesus come through, but two of them –

Titus and Dumachus – are very much awake. And so, as the story goes, these two robbers attack the family, but in the end Titus persuades Dumachus to let them go.

And Jesus responds by telling his mother that in 30 years he will be crucified, and these two robbers will be crucified with him – Dumachus on his left and Titus on his right. And on that day, Titus – who had just showed them a great kindness in sparing their lives – would go before him into paradise.

Down the line, this story would be told and re-told throughout the middle ages, and even up into the 19th Century by the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. This legend has captured the imagination of people far and wide.

And again, it's just a legend. But I do think that is natural for us, as we explore the crucifixion story, to wonder a little bit about these men, and the crimes that they committed. All Luke tells us is that they were "criminals." Matthew and Mark tell us a little bit more about their crimes – that they were "robbers" or "thieves." If we look earlier in Luke's gospel, back as far as chapter 10, we see in the story of the Good Samaritan Jesus describing the "typical" work of a thief, or a bandit, or a robber. These were folks who would hide out in the caves between towns, along major thoroughfares. And when unsuspecting travelers would come through – especially people who were travelling alone – these bandits would jump out at them and mug them. They would beat them within an inch of their lives, take everything they owned, and then leave them there to die and rot along the road. They showed no mercy, and their crimes were incredibly violent.

So that brings us back to our story today. There are three crosses there on the hill at Golgotha. Jesus is hanging on the middle one, with one thief – Gestas, or Dumachus, to his left, and Dismas, or Titus, to his right. The crowds are watching; the leaders are scoffing at him; the soldiers are mocking him, trying to rile up the crowds. And Gestas, the thief to Jesus's left, jumps right in and echoes what the soldiers are saying. "Yeah, Jesus. Save yourself. You know you can. And while you're at it, save us too!" It sounds to me eerily similar to the way the devil tempted Jesus in the desert way back at the beginning of his ministry. "If you are the son of God – if you really are who you say you are – turn these stones into bread! Throw yourself off the temple and let the angels save you!" "Come down off your cross! You know you can!"

But in Luke's telling of the story, the thief to Jesus's right – we'll call him Dismas – cuts off his partner in crime. "Stop it. You are in no position to say another word to him. You know good and well that of the three of us up here, Jesus is the only truly innocent one. You and I deserve this punishment, and more. We are getting what we deserve. But Jesus? Jesus doesn't deserve any of this." And then, he turns to Jesus and says to him, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

I think this is one of the most beautiful moments in any of the gospels. Look at the contrast here between these two. First, we have Gestas who – as in life, so in death. He

didn't care one iota about Jesus – about his guilt or innocence or anything else. All he wanted was to use Jesus to get ahead, just as he had used every person he encountered in life. And if he had to hurt Jesus – to add to Jesus's pain and humiliation to do it, so be it. "Jesus, get down off your cross, and take me down with you. Save me from my cross."

In contrast, Dismas never asks to be taken down. He asks to be taken *up*. Dismas looks at Jesus, at the crown of thorns on his head, at the mocking sign hanging over his cross reading "King of the Jews," at all the ways that the leaders were trying to drill it into every onlooker's head that "This is not what a king looks like, and anybody who follows this so-called 'king' may very well meet the same end, unless you fall in line," but Dismas sees past the mockery and recognizes something that nobody else does: This man is, in fact, a king. But *his* kingdom lies on the other side of this cross. And anyone who wants to come into his kingdom must also take up their cross – not come down from it.

The way to the kingdom is not through avoidance, but through repentance.

It is not through comfort, but through the cross.

And sometimes, this way of the cross – this journey to the kingdom – will come with pain. I was in a spirituality course this weekend in which the presenter remarked that the Christian journey is, more often than not, uphill and bumpy. Rarely is it smooth sailing. But on this journey of bumps we discover the joy of redemption.

Gestas – the unrepentant thief – wanted to avoid that pain at all costs. He did not want to be confronted with the reality of what his life had amounted to. He did not want to face his sins – the countless people he had hurt or even killed over the course of his life. "If I can find a way out of the pain; if I can find a way to avoid being faced with my crimes; if I can avoid being held accountable for my actions, I am going to do that. I want to come down off this cross so that I can get back to life as usual."

But Dismas was different. Dismas did not try to avoid consequences. He was not looking for a "way out." He saw the bumpy uphill road coming, and he braced for it. He allowed not just his body to be broken, but also his heart. He felt the pain that he had caused; he felt the weight of his own sin; he knew what his life amounted to. He named it. And as he hit rock bottom, he came face-to-face with the king of heaven and earth who is in the business of putting broken pieces back together again.

My friends, it is human nature to want to avoid pain. To avoid discomfort. To avoid carrying our cross. The way of the cross is indeed a bumpy road. It's uncomfortable to be made aware that maybe we *do* sometimes belong up there on that cross because of choices we have made. It's painful to come face-to-face with our own brokenness; our own insecurities; our own fears; our own tendencies. But the truth of the gospel is that we cannot be transformed into something new, unless we know what the old is that we are setting aside. We cannot recognize our God and king until we recognize that we ourselves are *not* God *or* king. We will not see paradise by asking God to take us down from our cross. Because the cross – the bumpy journey – the road of repentance and transformation – the pathway through brokenness – is how God leads us to discover

both our deep need and our deep longing for the God who alone can bring us joy on the other side.

So here's my prayer for each of us: That we might see ourselves as God sees us – fully and completely, yet with grace and love. That we might set aside the old garments of brokenness and be clothed in the newness of God's grace. And that as we take up our cross and walk the bumpy journey of faith – tripping and falling along the way, because that's what happens when we carry a cross – that the words of Christ will echo deeply within our souls: "Truly I tell you: today you will be with me in paradise."