The Cross of Salvation

*"Truly, today, you will be with me in Paradise."*

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Throughout his arrest, trial, and sentencing, Jesus was mocked and taunted by his accusers. Adding insult to injury, some of those mockers felt the need to continue hurling their vicious taunts while Jesus hung dying on the cross. There, they stood at the foot of the cross scoffing: “He saved others, let him save himself.” Even the soldiers mocked Jesus, whom they really didn’t know nor care about: “If you are a king, save yourself.”

The two criminals hanging beside Jesus also chose to use their own last words to join in the chorus of verbal assault: “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” they shouted. Like Jesus, they, too, are choosing to die the way they had lived — despicable bandits who ambushed unsuspecting travelers, savagely beating them and stealing all their possessions. Here, they savagely attack Jesus not with their fists, but with their words. Until one has a sudden change of heart. He says to his partner in crime, “Do you not fear God? We are getting what we deserve; this man has done nothing wrong.”

That's how it is in this world. In our economy of justice, people get what they deserve. The guilty are punished, the innocent set free — not the other way around. In this world, people save themselves before they save others, should they even choose to do so. Yet, hearing Jesus offer forgiveness to those who continued to mock and taunt him and, watching him refuse to save himself but rather offer up this incredible gift of sacrificial love. This hardened criminal comes to see for himself that Jesus is his Savior; the only one able to forgive him of his life of sin. What we might call his deathbed confession leads this repentant thief to a drastic conversion of faith: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Accepting his confession, Jesus offers him the blessed assurance that on that very day, he will enter paradise with Jesus — the blessed assurance we all seek at the time of our own death.

Throughout my ministry I've heard my fair share of deathbed confessions. My most memorable happened many years ago. An elderly gentleman I'll call him “Tom” collapsed at the end of the worship service. I followed the ambulance to the hospital and waited with the family as the doctors attended to him. When Tom was stable, his family and I were allowed into his room. A little while later he asked his family to clear out so that he could speak with me alone.

One of the greatest gifts of being a pastor is coming to know the stories of people's lives. Though I had heard it many times before, Tom again told me the story of how he had survived his own harrowing near-death experience when his plane was shot down over the Pacific during World War II. That was, for him, a defining moment of faith. From that day on, Tom felt like he was living on borrowed time, causing him to be grateful for each day of his long life and no longer afraid to die. I nodded as he retold me his story, waiting to hear what he so urgently needed to tell me.

Finally, Tom told me he had something he needed to confess. Something he had never told another living soul, not even his beloved wife of 60-plus years, quickly assuring me that he had committed his grievous sin long before he ever met her. From the look on his face and the somber tone of his voice, I knew it was something of which Tom was very ashamed. Knowing him as I did, I couldn't imagine what awful sin he could possibly have committed to warrant this apparent deathbed confession. Out it came: The awful thing of which Tom was so ashamed

was that as a college freshman, to help pay his way through school, he sold on the black market, putting it discreetly, certain items of protection for $1 to his 19-year-old college buddies.

Though that might have been quite scandalous in the 1940s, it was not at all what I had begun to imagine. Thankfully the giggle (a mixture of relief and humor) that bubbled up inside me was quickly subdued by the sweet sincerity in Tom's voice. He was desperately seeking the assurance that God would forgive him so that he could die in peace. I led him in a prayer of confession, assured him his sin was forgiven, and repeated Jesus' promise to him — “Today, you will be with me in paradise.”

Tom didn't die that day, but I could see that a great burden had been lifted from his soul. Not just the sin he carried, but Tom had been freed from his lingering doubt that he really was good enough to go to heaven — the same concern I've heard in many other deathbed confessions. There is still some part in all of us that believes that good people go to heaven and bad people go straight to hell, leaving us to question our own worthiness for receiving Christ's free gift of salvation.

If you saw the documentary “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” about Mr. Rogers, even he doubted his own goodness and whether or not he would enter into his eternal rest with Jesus by his side. When he was near death, he asked his wife, “Am I a sheep?” referring to Jesus’ parable of the separation of the sheep from the goats at the throne of mercy. It was an astonishing question coming from such a kind and gracious man who showed us how we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. His beloved wife assured her husband, “If anyone is a sheep, you are.” Yet, in the face of his own death, even Mr. Rogers wondered was he good enough.

If there is any story in the Bible that teaches us that our salvation is by grace alone through faith and not something we earn by our merit, it is this story of the penitent thief. It is only Christ’s goodness at work within us that enables and empowers us to be and do good. Listening to the voice of our Good Shepherd we will live in the way of righteousness. Then we will know the blessed assurance that, as his sheep, we will follow him into paradise.

The cross on the front of our bulletin is the budded cross. It reminds us that we are to grow in our wholehearted trust in the neverending graciousness of our good and loving Savior. This morning, we give thanks that the cross of crucifixion has become the cross of salvation.