"With Me in Paradise" -- Luke 23:39-43

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Emmett, Idaho
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Wednesday Vespers
Pastor Michael L. McCoy

"For He has not despised or abhorred
the affliction of the afflicted;
and He has not hid His face from him,
but has heard, when he cried to Him."
Psalm 22:24

Dear Baptized,

One time, at one of our circuit pastors' conferences, the suggestion was put forth that having the Lord's Supper every Sunday might constitute a diminishing of the announcement of the forgiveness of sins. The rhetorical question asked was something like this, "What, isn't the Absolution good enough?" The idea seemed to be that the overall announcement of the forgiveness of sins negated any particular, on-going need for individual absolution. One could, by extension of such a line of thought, also question, "Well then, why have private confession and absolution? Isn't the public announcement of the forgiveness of sins good enough?"

Certainly it is "good enough." The first words of Jesus proclaimed from the cross tell us that this is most certainly true and good enough. "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." Here is the Son of God's merciful plea for all those who were responsible for His death - the petition to forgive the whole world - from the hammer man who drove the nails through Jesus' hands and feet, to the newly conceived.

The Word is proclaimed that Jesus poured Himself out and atoned "for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2). What great news this is for us and for the whole world. But sometimes there is a specific need to know that the reverse is true. For the common, ordinary sinner might wonder if this is true for him or her. "Lord, I know you died for the whole world. But did You die for me?" For manifest sinners, those who are staring death in the face and who know that "God so loved the world that He gave His Only-Begotten Son" (John 3:16), there is the gnawing question spawned by sinful, human doubt, "Did Jesus die even for me?"

If this be you, then listen to the Word of God that speaks to the individual soul with the absolution that each one of us longs to hear. Behold, two evildoers are led away with Jesus to be executed for they are all under the same sentence of death - two because they deserve condemnation - One because He permits the proceedings and takes the curse upon Himself. Behold, Jesus Christ is crucified between two criminals or two convicted law-breakers. Please listen to the individual absolution spoken by the suffering Son of God under the theme of "Listen to Him" as He says ...

"... With Me in Paradise"

"One of the criminals who were hanged railed at Him, saying, ‘Are you not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.' And he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when You come in Your Kingdom.' And He said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.'"

Thus far the Word of the LORD our God.

They are criminals and Matthew informs us that they are robbers. The word that Luke uses to describe them is "evil-doers." Both of these robbers have broken the law and been caught. Both these evil-doers are receiving exactly what they deserve and are experiencing a foretaste of what eternity is like apart from the gracious presence of God. In the beginning, both of these criminals - one to the left of Jesus and the other to His right - both reviled Jesus as the yawning mouth of hell opened for them just as it does for all those who break God's Law in thought, word or deed. In the end, one is most certainly at Jesus' right hand to hear the Word of grace, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34) and the other will apparently be at our Redeemer's left and hear the Word of condemnation, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41).

Say the phrase "the thief on the cross" and most Christians will know the man of whom you speak - namely the contrite criminal who, while being crucified, pleaded to Jesus and was heard and saved. But what in the world happened between the reviling in the beginning and the penitent petition that preceded the Good News being announced to this manifest sinner?

Simply put, he heard the Word of forgiveness. This wicked man cried out against both God and man, and heard Jesus petitioning God the Father on behalf of "them." "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." This criminal was in a world of hurt and realized that if the Messiah could forgive "them" then there might be hope for him. The focused majesty of Jesus profoundly moved the one robber. The Holy Spirit used this Word and the occasion of the man's own impending death to bring him to faith in Jesus the Christ of God. Here the malefactor beheld, with the eyes of faith, the King of Israel and the Son of God Who had come to pronounce forgiveness for the world while lifted up and enthroned on a cross.

The repentant evil-doer has been brought to faith in Christ for surely His Father hears and answers the perfect prayers of His Son. Forgiveness for the world has been accomplished by Jesus and is intended for all. This one man has been given the gift of God's forgiveness for he believed that what Jesus said was intended even for him. Now he who is brought to faith in Christ and trust in Jesus is ready to be of service to the Lord. But truly, what is one who is pinned to a cross-beam and within hours of death able to do for the Lord and His Kingdom?

"Nothing," you say? Not quite. Please listen, for an unbeliever is beginning to speak out, "One of the criminals who were hanged railed at Him, saying, ‘Are you not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.'"

Here is a pristine example of what Jesus meant when He said, "Whoever confesses Me before men,

him will I also confess before My Father Who is in heaven" (Matthew 10:32). The dying man confessed Christ to the other criminal in an attempt to bring the Word to him, as well as to any who were in the area and might be able to hear him as he bore witness, including the Roman centurion, Mary, the soldiers, John, the chief priests, the elders, the scribes and perhaps even the "many women who followed Jesus from Galilee ... (who) were there looking on from afar" (Matthew 27:55). Truly the Son of God is well pleased with this confession before men and acknowledges the faithful one before His Father Who is in heaven. This repentant man, a few hours before his death, has been given the greatest Gift that can ever be given ... the Holy Spirit given gift of faith in Jesus Christ. It is graciously given and can not and may not be taken.

Ahh yes, dear soul, in reality the real thief at "the Place of the Skull" is Jesus. Both of the others who are being crucified are incapable of either thievery or robbery. They are in receiving mode, both getting exactly what they deserve and both now have upon themselves the sentences they deserve - the one of temporal death and everlasting condemnation - the other temporal death and eternal life. Indeed, the penitent evil-doer has been gifted with forgiveness of sins and where there is such forgiveness, there is also eternal life and salvation.

If understood properly, Jesus is the Thief, for without asking He has taken their death as His own, and without their permission He has taken their cursed sinfulness upon Himself, and unbeknownst to them He has taken all their sins away from them. For you see, "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8) - "that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them" (2 Cor. 5:19).

Outstanding! This is what the child of God believes. But then why, after he heard Jesus pray "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," why do we hear his voice? Why, after he had been brought to faith in Jesus, do we hear his prayer? "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your Kingdom."

Part of the answer is the reality of the Christian's situation in this dying world. The penitent criminal on the cross, though having heard and having believed the general absolution "Father, forgive them" and though he knew that he was forgiven, still he needed to hear the Word applied individually. "Jesus, remember me." I am hurting as I have never hurt before. Though I have made the confession of my sin and heard the Word of forgiveness in the absolution, I need to commune with You. The world is pressing in on me and the sun is darkening before my eyes. I am in shock and I need to hear Your Word of hope and promise to me specifically. I am passing away and everything is receding before me ... everything except You and me. "You have the Words of eternal life" (John 6:68). Therefore, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your Kingdom."

Another part of the answer is that the forgiveness of sins is one thing and being with Christ in Paradise is another. Forgiveness is now. Paradise is coming. The First Adam stretched out his hand, took the fruit of the forbidden Tree, and ate it. Thus Paradise was closed. Jesus, the Second Adam is the Fruit on the leafless Tree of Life, and for the one who faithfully feeds on this Savior. Thus is Paradise opened. This is what you and I wait for and long to have. While we wait, we need and we have the opportunity for private confession and absolution ... we hunger for the Lord's Supper, each of us, individually looking forward to receiving the Body and Blood of the Incarnate Son of God on Sunday morning.

We do this according to His invitation, for as often as we eat of this bread and drink and drink of the

cup, we proclaim the sin-atoning death of Christ in our stead and we receive, as He intends - the remission of sins and the strengthening of faith. Or, as the Lutheran Confessions declare: "... we must repeat the prefatory statement that we do not abolish the Mass but religiously keep and defend it. In our churches Mass is celebrated every Sunday and on other festivals, when the sacrament is offered to those who wish for it after they have been examined and absolved" (AP "The Mass").

For us, forgiveness is now and Paradise is coming. How soon is Paradise for us? Only the Lord knows. What we do know is that, for the repentant man dying beside Jesus, his first Absolution and his entry into Paradise were much closer together in time. After having been crucified with Christ and after hearing the faithful man's petition, Jesus "said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.'"

The man had Jesus' Word. Therefore, sometime between 3:00 and 6:00 pm on the first Good Friday, the penitent man known as the Thief on the Cross, was with Jesus in Paradise. Amen.

"REMEMBER me," implored the Thief—
Oh magnanimity!
"My Visitor in Paradise
I give thee Guaranty."

That courtesy will fair remain,
When the delight is dust,
With which we cite this mightiest case
Of compensated Trust.

Of All, we are allowed to hope,
But Affidavit stands
That this was due, where some, we fear,
Are unexpected friends.
[Emily Dickinson, 1830-1886]