

Were You There? Sermon Series
The Good Thief – Luke 23:32:43
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In the church I served in seminary, I had a reputation for being a bit of a word nerd. As a former journalist, I came by it naturally, but that didn't gain me any sympathy with the rest of the staff. They would roll their eyes when I would correct their newsletter articles by taking the "x" out of espresso or "ir" off of "irregardless." And don't get me started on the omission of the Oxford comma! For my going-away present, they got me a shirt that said on the front, "Grammer Nerd." But, and I swear this is true, the word "Grammer" was spelled G-R-A-M-M-E-R. And not on purpose. See, those people needed me! Wearing a "Grammer Nerd" shirt with a misspelled word is the definition of an oxymoron.

You probably know a lot of other oxymorons in your life. An oxymoron is two words or phrases put together that have opposite meanings. It comes from the root "oxy," meaning "sharp," and "moron," meaning that one high school friend you have on Facebook. Oxymorons are everywhere in our world. One of my favorite bands, Fall Out Boy, has a song called "Let's Be **Alone Together**." Geez, that's **pretty ugly**. At least that's my **unbiased opinion**. I think it's **awfully good**, but you may have **zero tolerance** for it. Don't worry, this will be a **brief sermon**. If you like it, I can give you an **original copy**. If you don't like it, try to **act naturally** or just **silently scream**. It may be your **least favorite**, but to be honest, that's your **only choice**. Hopefully you'll **remember forgetting** it later. The world is full of oxymorons.

The peculiar linguistic beauty of an oxymoron is the tension it creates. Something jumbo is big and a shrimp is small, so the phrase "jumbo shrimp" creates this dissonance in our minds that we can't quite reconcile. How can a shrimp be jumbo? Oxymorons create cognitive tension for us that we can't resolve, and we have to figure out what to do with it. Do we seek clarification: is it big or small? Or do we simply choose to live with the tension and eat the jumbo shrimp? The world is full of oxymorons.

So is the gospel. Think about it: the last shall be first, and the first shall be last. Jesus says, "When you helped the least of these, you helped me." Those who try to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake will save it. Sorry, Jesus, but we worship an oxymoron: a crucified savior, God made flesh. There's a dynamic tension in those phrases that confronts us, forcing us to figure out what to do with them.

Here's another one: the good thief, who was crucified next to Jesus. The tension is created for us because usually there's nothing good about thieves. In Jesus' time, a thief could be guilty of any number of crimes, from petty burglary to subversive acts committed directly against the Roman leaders. Maybe this guy pickpocketed Pilate or tried to sell a soldier a fake sundial. We don't know. It's doubtful that he would be given such an extreme penalty for a petty crime, but the Romans had a habit of making examples of people by crucifying them in very public places. You'd think twice about stealing something when the last guy who tried was nailed to a cross. We shouldn't spend too much time on his crime, though, because in the end it doesn't matter. Jesus doesn't ask the man to give an accounting of his wrongdoings. Jesus simply hears this man's plea

– remember me when you come into your kingdom – then assures him of a place in paradise that very day.

This is what you would call a deathbed conversion. At the last moment, a scoundrel who's lived a shadowy life repents and gets the key to heaven right before his last breath. We're supposed to cheer, right? Another lost sheep is found! That's all well and good when the story stays matted on the pages of scripture, but what about when it happens in real life?

That's the premise of "Dead Man Walking," a great movie and wonderful test of the limits of our understanding of grace. Sean Penn is Matthew Poncelet, a man accused of murder, and Susan Sarandon is Sister Helen Prejean, who visits Poncelet in jail and tries to help him admit to his crime. For much of the movie Poncelet is like the first thief on the cross: angry, sarcastic, defiant. It's only during his final hours that he truly opens up and repents of his sins, admitting that he was one who committed the murders. And then he is executed by lethal injection, arms spread out as if he were on a cross.

I know a lot of people who have trouble with the theological concept at work here. The oxymoronic tension of a forgiven murderer is almost too much for some people to bear. Why should a murderer receive forgiveness and enter into the same kingdom as me? I've never killed, I've never committed any really bad sins, and yet I'm going to be seated at the heavenly banquet table next to Matthew Poncelet?

Yes, we are, and probably next to a lot of other people we don't expect to see there. That's the beauty of the good news of Jesus Christ: he died so that we all might have new life. And all means all, even those people we think don't deserve it. That's the hard truth that the Good Thief and "Dead Man Walking" force us to confront. There is no prioritization of sins in the Bible. Believe me, I've looked! There's not a chapter in Numbers or Zechariah that says, "Lying is a one-star sin, cheating is three-star sin, and murder is five-star sin." It's not there. What is there is this, in Romans: "All have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God." All. That's you and me and Matthew Poncelet and the morons on Facebook and every other person you can think of, good or bad. The Bible doesn't separate us based on our sins. All have fallen short.

That's the essence of the good news. We've all fallen short, but we'll never fall so far that we're out of God's reach. That's good news for those of us who try hard to live Christian lives, but that's great news for the thieves and the liars and all the other people we don't expect to see. Even they can be forgiven. Even they called a child of God.

At one point in "Dead Man Walking," Sister Prejean looks at Poncelet and says, "You are a son of God." Through his tears he says, "Thank you. I've never been called a son of God before." Then he laughs and says, "I've been called a son of a you-know-what plenty of times, but I've never been called a son of God."

I'm guessing the Good Thief had been called a son of a you-know-what plenty of times, but had never been called a son of God until he was dying on the cross. That's the power in what he asks: "Jesus, remember me." He's felt forgotten by God. He wants to be remembered, not for what he's done, but for who he is. He doesn't ask Jesus to miraculously save him from the consequences of his actions. He is a flawed human being and simply wants to be remembered.

The reformer Martin Luther said, we are "Simul Justus et Peccator - righteous, and at the same time sinners." We are saved sinners. That's the tension we live with as believers. We know we should be better and yet we can't help being our flawed selves.

Paul spells it out clearly in Romans: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.” Geez, what an oxymoron! We people of faith are called to live with this tension, trusting that Jesus stands in the gap between who God wants us to be and who we are. The issue is not the greatness of our sin but our willingness to admit our need for help and to take the next step – which may be the first step for us – toward change.

But right there is the stumbling block for so many of us. How can we be helped if we don’t admit our need for it? How can we worship a Savior if we think we don’t need to be saved? I bet the Good Thief spent most of his life relying completely on his own abilities. It was him against the world, and he had what it takes to make it, doggone it. He could pull himself up by his bootstraps, fend for himself, look out for number one. He didn’t need handouts or hand-me-downs or a helping hand, until his hands had nails through them. It was there, at his lowest point, at his most helpless, that the thief looked beyond himself and saw, not another criminal or vagabond or low-life, but a king. “Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.” And with Jesus’ response, the Thief is given the key to paradise. If there’s hope for him, there’s hope for all the thieves we know, including me.

I stole a candy bar once. I was in fourth grade, and my friends and I were at the local 7-11. Someone had left a Snickers bar lying on the Ms. Pacman video game we were playing. One of my friends asked me, “Is that yours?” and in a moment of mindless bravado and earthshaking stupidity I put it in my pocket and said, “It is now.”

I quickly walked out of the store, but I was followed by the clerk, who stopped me and said, “Do you have a candy bar in your pocket?” Busted. “Yes.” “Did you pay for that candy bar?” “No.” I was already envisioning the penalty for my crime: a call to my mom, flashing blue lights, handcuffs, a criminal record, a career in politics. Then the lady looked me right in the eyes, right into my soul, then pulled a dollar bill out of her pocket and said, “That’s OK. I’ve got you.” And she walked away.

The Good Thief says, “We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve.” For our sins, for the things we have done and the things we have left undone, for the things we have said and the things we should have said, for the things we do and the things we shouldn’t do but do anyway, there is a price. But Christ has said, “That’s OK. I’ve got you.” Can he do that for you? All you have to do is ask. “Jesus, remember me.” Simul Justus et Peccator. Because of what Christ has done for us, we can look forward to an eternity of oxymorons: a paradise filled with thieves and sinners and you and me.