

Last Sunday of the Church Year C 20 November 2022

Luke 23:33-43

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Then [the thief] said, "Jesus, remember me." Those words from the thief on the cross echo the cry and deep yearning of every person who hears their loving, heavenly Father calling them to return home from their prodigal wandering. So, I particularly want each person here today to hear and personalise Jesus' soothing response and promise to you: *"Truly I tell you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."* Let's pray:

We all know what it's like to be remembered, don't we? Think of the joy a child expresses when they receive a personally addressed envelope or parcel in the mail. And, we all know what it's like to be forgotten. People like to be remembered. Whether it's a phone call, a letter, a visit, a gift, a simple word, a prayer. A surprise or even something hoped for and realised. Maybe something as simple as a nod, being recognised, looked in the eye, or called by name. Regardless of what it is or how it comes about, it brings a sense of healing, wholeness, and life. People long to be remembered. It means that we matter, we belong, we exist, and our life is real.

Being remembered brings life, presence, and relationship. We know how important remembering is. A couple of weeks ago we honoured the significance of remembering through the observance of All Saints. We remembered by name those we love and who love us, those who are forever a part of us and our lives, those who have nurtured, cared for, taught, and shared their lives with us.

When we're remembered, it's as though our life is being put back together. That's exactly what's happening. We're being made whole. Despite the scattered and broken pieces of our lives, in the moment of being remembered we're seen, recognised, acknowledged, and known by name. We're alive. We're remembered.

Compare that to times when you've been forgotten. Maybe you've been on a date and were left waiting for someone who didn't show up? Maybe someone forgot your birthday, your wedding anniversary or other significant events in your life. In moments like these we feel alone, embarrassed, uncertain, displaced, wounded, maybe even angry. A sense of helplessness lingers, questions and doubts arise, and we're no longer sure of our place or whether we even belong. Regardless of how or why it comes about there's hurt, separation, and isolation; our relationships and our lives suffer alienation.

Deep down no one wants to be forgotten. Whether we express it out loud or not, our soulful cry is to be remembered. Every day of our lives, we tread the fine line between being remembered and being forgotten, and by logical extension, remembering and forgetting others.

To be clear, I'm not talking about the usual understanding of remembering and forgetting as a cognitive or mental exercise. This is more than recalling a past event or failing to stop at the shops on the way home from work to pick up milk and bread. I'm talking about re-membering in the sense of joining the pieces together, putting the parts back together again as one. The opposite is dis-membering - separating, dividing, or pulling apart.

The thief on the cross wants to be re-membered, put back together again. He's not asking to simply be thought about. He knows that no good can come of that for him. He cries out, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Note that Jesus doesn't say, "I'll think about you when I'm in Paradise. I'll think about this moment. I'll think about how sad and tragic your life has become, but I won't do anything about it." Nor is the thief asking for sympathy or a reprieve from his sentence. He's asking Jesus to re-member him; to put his life back together again.

Just like the thief we too want to be re-membered, to have the many pieces of our life put back together. Our cry confesses that we acknowledge that we've been dis-membered; disenfranchised from God by the torment of sin, and we're helpless, hanging like a thief on a cross. Pieces have been scattered through loss and grief, shattered dreams, disappointment, regret, failures, rejection, the death of a loved one; even our actions, our words, our thoughts.

Our lives are fragmented and broken, and this vulnerability can cause desperation and we can easily become thieves, taking what isn't ours. We dis-member the lives of others in an attempt to put our own back together.

Theft happens in all sorts of ordinary ways: anger and resentment, criticism, judgement, envy, loathing, comparison and competition, gossip, bad-mouthing, perfectionism, the need to be right or in control, busyness, excessive productivity and efficiency. Look at your relationships. Wherever there's strain, hurt, brokenness, the likelihood is that you or someone else is being dis-membered, forgotten, torn apart.

Saints, that's not the life God gave us. That's not God's dream, hope, will for us. That's not what it was like in the very beginning. On the day of our creation, when God looked at all of his creation, us included, he declared, "It is טַבְּיָדָב [very good]."

Sometimes, however, it's difficult to recognise our own dis-membering. Listen to what the leaders, the soldiers, and the other thief in today's gospel say. "Save yourself. Prove who you are. Save us." They want a magic show. They want to escape their lives rather than have them put back together in a way they could never imagine. So, they mock Jesus, they deride Jesus, and they demand proof. All are expressions of their own dis-memberment. They even divide, or dis-member, Jesus' clothes.

Yet, in the eye of the storm swirling around Jesus' crucifixion, lies an ironic truth. It's an inscription nailed at the top of the cross above Jesus' head. It's a sign of re-membering and it simply says, INRI (Latin: Iēsus Nazarēnus Rēx Iūdaeōrum), which in English translates to "JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS" (John 19:19). It declares a re-membering between the Jews and their King, between God and God's people, between Jesus and us. The cross is the ultimate act of re-membering; God in Christ joining and aligning himself with us in the pain and suffering of this life. Re-membering is always an act of selfless love.

Every time we participate in the life of Christ by living with mercy, compassion, forgiveness; every time we speak a word of hope and encouragement; every time we love unconditionally, without expectation, or payment; every time we share our bread and live in communion with one another, we participate in Christ's re-remembering of our own lives, the lives of each other, and the life of the world. We "do this in remembrance of [Jesus]." In those moments we hear the promise of Jesus, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

"Today you will be with me in Paradise. Today you will be re-remembered. Today you will be restored to the image in which you were originally created." Re-remembering offers us a foretaste of this consummation to come. It's what Jesus offers us and what we, in our re-remembering and living like Jesus, offer each other. Re-remembering happens today in Jesus' presence with us, and ours with him and each other.

"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Why do we hear this promise from Jesus today, on the last Sunday of the Church's year? Why this gospel on this day? Jesus' promise is the hinge, the link, the connector between the ending of this liturgical year and the beginning of the next. It stands between the crucifixion and the nativity, the falling of the temple from last week's gospel and the return of Christ in next week's gospel. Ultimately though, it's the promise that joins the many different endings in our lives with a new beginning. In Christ's eyes we're never forgotten and dis-membered. We are forever and always re-remembered. "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" is Jesus' promise to each one of us, this and all the rest of the days of our lives. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.