

Luke 23:32-43

Jesus is on the cross in the middle. Two men, criminals, hang on either side of Him. And for some reason we think that the criminal on Jesus' right is the one who repents, and that the criminal on His left is the one who does not. But we were not there to see it. And the Scriptures do not tell us which side belonged to which criminal. So it's guesswork on our part. I must confess that whenever I have preached this text, I have always referred to the criminal on Jesus' right as the one who was saved. And don't paintings, which depict this scene on Calvary, show Jesus speaking His words of promise to the criminal on His right? Won't we be surprised if, in heaven, that criminal tells us, "Hey! I was the one on Jesus' left; the man on His right is the one who perished."

Does it matter? I think so, in a way that has significance for us. For one thing, Jesus is in the middle. This we know; it says so. And above His head is the inscription: "*This is the king of the Jews.*" The King is in the middle. The criminals are on His right and on His left. And yet one of these criminals is saved. Jesus ushers him into Paradise with His words of promise. The other criminal receives no such promise. He enters into the eternal fire.

This scene on Calvary is a snapshot in time of what will be at the end of time. Listen to the words of Matthew 25: "*When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. Before Him will be gathered all the nations, and He will separate people one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And He will place the sheep on His right, but the goats on the left.*" And there we have it. We place the criminal who was saved on Jesus' right because this is where Jesus places His sheep. And the other criminal we place on His left because this is where Jesus puts the goats.

But they're both criminals. Neither one deserves a place on the right. And this is true of Jesus' sheep. "*Come,*" He says to them, "*inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*" He does not say, "*Come, My sheep, enter the kingdom you earned for yourself.*" Nor do the sheep say this. They paid no attention to the good works they did in their life. Their attention was on Jesus.

And this is what we see in the criminal. He does not ask Jesus to remember the good works that he did amid his life of crime. He confesses that his life is a mess, a total wreck. But his attention is on Jesus. He sees Him as the King; but not just as a king - the King who saves sinners like him. "*Jesus,*" he says, "*remember me when You come into Your kingdom.*"

Where you are in life now determines where you will be in the Judgment. The goats will be on Jesus' left then, because they are now on His left. But Jesus' sheep are placed now on His right, and so they will be on His right in the Judgment.

Psalm 98 tells us about God, that "*His right hand...has worked salvation for Him.*" This salvation He worked for you. And His right hand and holy arm has drawn you near to His side in love. To be on Jesus' right is to receive His salvation in Holy Baptism. To be on His right is to hear His words of salvation here in His house; to gather at His altar where He places His salvation upon your very lips. Your place will be on Jesus' right in the Judgment because now, He places you on His right where you are hearing and receiving His words of promise.

You and I are just like that criminal. Our place on Jesus' right is not due to how well we have lived, for none of us has lived well enough to deserve a place on Jesus' right - not now, and not in the final Judgment. We are all criminals according to God's strict Law. An earthly court may not have convicted us, but that matters not. God's Law convicts us, and condemns us to a place with the goats on Jesus' left in the eternal fire.

Yet here you are on Jesus' right. Here, His right hand has opened your ears, just as He opened the ears of that criminal. Jesus spoke that man into Paradise. And this is what He does for you. Here He speaks to you, whom the Holy Spirit has gathered to Jesus' right hand. He speaks salvation into you by declaring that your sins are forgiven. He did not accuse that criminal; nor does He accuse you. The same words that criminal heard - "*Father, forgive them...*" are spoken also to you. That man believed those words, and you, by believing the same words, will enter into Paradise.

The other criminal heard the same words of forgiveness. But he did not believe them. And so his place was on Jesus' left - then, and forever. But this is not what his King wanted for him. Jesus cried His words of salvation out loud, in public, for all to hear. Jesus wants all sinners at His right hand. He desires all to be saved. He is the King of grace; the King of love.

If you, my friend, have been living too much on Jesus' left hand, now is the day of salvation. Your King is in the middle. He is dying for you; but His words are words of life. The world is off kilter. It's turned toward the left. We gravitate towards the left. No one can move himself to Jesus' right; not even us. But Jesus' words move us there. There is power in His words. And His words are for you. Your Baptism placed you on Jesus' right, and daily, God's grace keeps calling you to return to your Baptism on Jesus' right hand.

"*Remember me,*" asked the criminal, "*when You come into Your kingdom.*" He had no idea when that would be. Maybe a long time far off in the distance. But his heart was lifted by Jesus' words: "*Today you will be with Me in Paradise.*" His King was entering His kingdom today! Today Jesus would remember him. Today this criminal would be with his King in Paradise! His place would be on Jesus' right forever because his place was on His right hand today.

Today is the Last Sunday of the Church Year, and so we look to the future; to that Day when our King will return. And we do not fear that Day, even though we are criminals. It's because we claim a place with that criminal who repented. Jesus' sheep keep their attention on Jesus as they carry on with their lives. They stay, by the grace of God, on Jesus' right now, and so they will be on His right forever.

Whether that Day in the future is a long way off, or whether that Day is today for you, you can have the same peace, confidence, and joy which that man had hanging on Jesus' right. He had Jesus' words of promise to cling to, and so do you.

Wherever you have been in life, Jesus' love and forgiveness - His words of promise, will return you to His right hand today. Amen.