

"He's Got the Power"  
Sermon by Lisa Crismore  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – November 17, 2016

Luke 23:33-43

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? 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 have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

This last week, I had an extremely difficult phone call from my friend who is fighting uterine cancer. Her white blood cell count had fallen below the required number to receive chemo treatment. This had thrown her off schedule and offered a potential threat of additional chemo rounds. On top of this, she is dealing with severe migraines and paralyzing fatigue. I heard in her voice that sitting around with time to think about life and all its possibilities was horrifying. An answered prayer of resuming chemo to stay on schedule meant giving up Thanksgiving celebrations with extended family and dear friends.

Her life sucks and I so wanted to save her from her pain. Even though Joyce's faith in God is very strong, I still struggle to understand why she has to go through this. But, I can pray for her; I can ask that you all shower her with cards of encouragement; I can go to be with her and give her support.

As this weighs heavy on my heart, I am greeted by the crucifixion story in our lectionary. This story of Christ on the cross is given to us as we celebrate Christ the King Sunday. I am moved by the taunting and questioning of "Jesus, why can't you save yourself?" Jesus, why can't you save yourself from this pain and death? Like the thief, who questioned, "Why can't you save yourself and us?"

Jesus is the king, who has the power to do anything. We see his power throughout the gospels. Jesus healed the blind, deaf, lepers and demon possessed. He fed 5000 people with a basket of food. He raised Lazarus from the grave. He mended Zacchaeus' cheating heart. With all this power, why don't you save yourself.

I want to say, "Stand up and fight Jesus!" Come down off the cross and show the men, who are gambling for your clothes, who you are! Stop the men mocking you! Wouldn't this seal the deal and prove who you are! Where is your anger when you turned over the tables in the temple. Please save yourself, Jesus, and while you are doing this, save us too!

And yet on this day of celebrating the Reign of Christ, we are met with the words, “Father forgive them because they do not know what they are doing.” Pastor Edward Markquart says, “As we stand at the cross, we are faced with the very mystery of God, the mystery of our universe, at the very heart of the mystery of love.”

([http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series\\_c\\_save\\_us\\_from\\_our\\_crosses.htm](http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_c_save_us_from_our_crosses.htm))

The power of our king was shown in the ultimate sacrifice of love and grace. This is the power that we have such a difficult time understanding. We are grateful for the saving grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, who fiercely loves us so much that he uses his power to not save himself but saves us. Yet, this power doesn't save us from our pain. It doesn't save us from suffering. It doesn't solve all of our problems.

Two weeks ago at Rockville Women's Prison, our team of 34 women, including myself and Jillian, spent the entire weekend of sharing God's love and grace with 36 prisoners. It is amazing to see them experience and receive God's gracious, forgiveness. For some, it is the first time. For others, it is a reminder. But, it is always challenging to help them see that God is not going to instantly make life perfect. God is not going to instantly answer all their prayers. Our teaching moment is to show them that even though God can't take away all their pain, God will be there to see them through the pain. God will be there in their suffering and challenges. God gives them each other for that support as they build a community of believers.

David Ewart says this, “All of us would very much like to have a savior who would come to the rescue, kill the bad guys, cure the disease, end the injuries and solve every painful circumstance. But that's not the kind of savior Jesus is.

Salvation is not an event. It is not a miracle that rescues us from pain. Salvation is a relationship. It is an intimate, true and trusting, loving relationship of God. It has nothing to do with circumstances.

The salvation of Jesus is not about miraculous changing of circumstances – climbing down off crosses. The salvation of Jesus is about a relationship – God's relationship with us – that endures, survives and persists through all circumstances. And, I believe, brings us finally to Paradise – a final circumstance that supercedes all circumstances; and instead bring us finally, fully and freely into a relationship of healing, reconciliation, justice and lasting peace and joy. Hhttp://www.holytextures.com/2010/luke23:33-43-year-c-pentecost-november-20-november-26-reign-christ-king-proper-29-ordinary-time-34-sermon-html)

In the mystery of love that is presented at the cross, I am struck by the thief, who asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom. This thief, who has done some pretty bad things, has this sense that Christ will think about him after he dies. We have no idea if there has been any other communication between these two people.

One commentator suggests that perhaps, the thief heard Jesus speak of the kingdom of God being like a father who welcomes his prodigal son home with open arms even after the son squandered all his father's money. Or, this guy maybe heard the kingdom of God is like the shepherd who loses one sheep and leaves the other 99 sheep behind to go and seek out the one lost one. Or, the kingdom of God is like the rich man who had a party for

all his wealthy friends. But, when they could not come, the man opens the invitation to all the broken souls. (Feasting on the Word – Year C; by Nancy Lynn Westfield; Westminster John Knox publishing; 2010; p. 334)

It is clear that the thief believes he belongs on the cross but he also believes that Jesus is the Messiah, God's chosen one. He believes and hopes in the one who will redeem him.

How would we respond to this person, knowing what he has done? If it were me, I would probably harbor a grudge because I was getting equal punishment for something I did not do? Or I might be so wrapped up in my own suffering that I would ignore the needs of the others? Or I may pass judgment and think this thief is not worth my time?

But Christ the king blows us away by telling the thief that he will join Jesus in paradise **without questions**. This amazing love of our king is seen in the grace that does not reprimand or judge. It is not selfish. It simply invites and welcomes no matter how long or deep the relationship that we have with him.

On this day when we celebrate the reign of Christ, we give thanks to God for Jesus' amazing love and grace. Our king who shows us how to live, love, serve and give. We give thanks for the power he used not to save himself but to save us. Amen.