

McCabe United Methodist Church
“Today You Will Be With Me in Paradise”
Luke 23:32, 39-43
3-3-13
Pastor Ray Baker

We live in a world where people call themselves Spiritual, instead of religious. People believe in God, but not in the Church. I understand why some people make this distinction. They are trying to separate themselves from the real and perceived mistakes of orthodox religion and the institutional Church. But it troubles me greatly when people walk so far away from the Institutional Church that they also walk away from their faith. Let me share an extreme example to make my point.

In 2001, there was a news article called: “Not so good news.” It’s a story about a group of “Star Wars” fans who took things too far. The news report said: They lived out Obi Wan Kenobi’s statement: “The Force can have a strong influence on the weak-minded.”

A group of Star Wars fans sent an email blast throughout Australia asking people to identify their religious affiliation as “Jedi” on the new census. This caused such a stir the statistics office they planned to fine people who put “Jedi” as their religion.

One person responded in an email: “We feel we are Jedi. Star Wars gave us our spirituality. Obi Wan taught me mysticism, not St. John of the Cross.

People may not like religiosity or the institutional church, but they need to have a faith in something greater than fake movie mysticism.

This is our second message about Jesus’ last statements from the cross. Today we will hear the Gospel of Luke report of Jesus exchange with the thief on the cross. Listen to these words and imagine they are being shared from the thief on the cross.

“He looked at me with compassion.

It had been a long time since I had felt anyone’s compassion. My mother died when I was seven. My father was a drunkard whose idea of encouragement was to call me an idiot and to tell me to leave him alone. So I did. I began committing petty crimes when I was ten. I’d committed armed robbery when I was fifteen. And I killed a man before I was twenty. I was a hopeless cause.

And here I was, 47 years old, carrying my cross on the way to Calvary. It was amusing to me that Jesus of Nazareth was being crucified with us. I knew of him. Some of my friends had gone to hear him. I knew some of the girls who had found religion by listening to him. They claimed he was God's Messiah.

Strange Messiah—befriending sinners and prostitutes. If I believed in God, that's the kind of Messiah I would want. But I didn't, and so I was sure he wasn't.

Yet I can tell you this: I could not take my eyes off of him. A huge crowd came out for his crucifixion—the moneychangers, the religious leaders, the Romans, and all those religious hypocrites. They stood around him, hurling insults at him. I joined in at first, glad they weren't insulting me. But even I didn't have the stomach for this. (PAUSE) It was then I heard him praying from the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." I was stunned—this friend of sinners prayed for mercy for his enemies.

He turned and looked at me as if he could see right through me; once more he looked at me with compassion. Even in my pain, I found myself drawn to this man. If, as some said, he was sent from God, and if God was like this man, showing mercy to sinners, then perhaps there was hope for me.

Levi, my partner in crime, began to hurl insults at Jesus once more. I shouted, "Levi, stop it! Don't you see? We're getting what we deserve. He's done nothing wrong." And then, for reasons I still don't understand, I turned to Jesus and said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Adam Hamilton, Last Words, chapter 2)

Two-thousand years ago the world surrounding the Mediterranean Sea was ruled by the Roman Empire. During this time there were twelve (12) men, and a group of women who traveled with them, who taught a message of Repentance and Baptism. Literally they challenged people to stop, turn around, change the direction of your life and be baptized with the Holy Spirit. They taught the people about the Kingdom of God, rather than the kingdoms of this world.

- The twelve professed a belief in welcoming the strangers in our midst and loving our enemies; instead, of a message about power and aggression.
- The twelve taught that we should feed the hungry, heal the sick, and visit the prisoners; instead of being concerned with religiosity, purity codes, and bowing to the powers of this world.

One of the ways people keep from bowing to “Power” today is through the use of satire. There is a satirical news source, called “The Onion,” which pokes fun at almost everything. Many people were surprised that following the September 11th terrorist attacks “The Onion” was one of the groups asking for religious tolerance. They did so by writing a satirical article about God giving a press conference after the attack on the twin towers.

The Onion reported that following the attacks the terrorist were surprised to find themselves in hell, when they expected to be rewarded with the gift of ‘Eternal Paradise.’ But God responded to their questions by saying: “Why won’t you listen to my teachings? Do not kill.”

During the press conference God said: “Somehow, people keep coming up with the idea that I want them to kill their neighbor. Well, I don’t. And to be honest, I’m really getting sick and tired of it. How many times do I have to say it? Don’t kill each other anymore -- ever! “

The people attending the press conference said, then God’s shoulders began to shake and God wept.

There is an old Korean Folktale which identifies a “truth” contained at the heart of the Christian Faith. It reminds me of Jesus death on the cross.

In the 4th century A.D. in Korea, a man had two sons. The elder rose to become Chief Justice in the land and the younger became an infamous bandit.

The elder brother loved his younger brother but was unable to persuade him to change his ways.

Eventually the younger son was caught and brought before his brother, the Chief Justice. Everyone in the courtroom thought the younger brother would get off because it was well-known that the Chief Justice loved his brother

But at the end of the trial, the Chief Justice sentenced his brother to death.

On the day of the execution, the elder brother came to the prison and said to his brother "Let's swap places." The younger brother agreed, thinking that once they realized that it was the elder brother, the execution would not go forward.

He went up on the hill to watch the proceedings. His brother was brought out at dawn and to his horror executed.

Filled with remorse, he ran down the hill and told the guard his name and that he was the criminal who should be executed. The guards said to him: There are no outstanding warrants on anyone with that name.

There was a beloved old woman who celebrated her 100th birthday; surrounded by family, friends, and church members. Her family showed slides of her life; told old stories about her work in the church and community, her family, and how she loved life itself.

Later they asked her to say a few words. She spoke of the people in her life and her many, many wonderful memories of them. She said it was her faith and her relationships which made life worth living.

At the end of her comments she surprised everyone by talking about a terrible accident which took place a few weeks before her birthday. This tragedy hit close to home because the people involved were her friends and members of her church. She said: "The news reports claim a family of five (5) lost their lives in that car accident. But they've got it wrong. We Christians don't lose our lives...we only lose our bodies; because we have the gift of eternal life. On the day we leave this world we will hear Jesus say: 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.'"

AMEN