

How many of you remember the recent movie or the old TV show, *A Team*? The show always ended with the lead character, Hannibal, saying, "I love it when a plan comes together!" Well, two weeks ago I was a man ahead of my plan for these Lenten sermons, but today the plan has come together--and I love it! We're really going to look more deeply at this poignant story in Luke 23.

During this Lenten season we're examining some of the heartfelt prayers and words of people in crisis who were a part of the Passion Story, the events of the last week of Jesus' life here on earth.

The story we shared this morning includes one of those crisis prayers, "Jesus, remember me." It's often referred to as the "Story of the Penitent Thief." Even though the spotlight is on Jesus, Luke wants us to look closer at the other two persons crucified with him. Are we to see something here for us? I believe we are.

The thieves crucified with Jesus were placed "one on his right, the other on his left." This was done by order of the priests and rulers to further humiliate Jesus and to indicate He was the greatest criminal of the three.

In these two thieves we see a composite of our world. It's a fact we all experience pain and death in this world. Some look away and blame God; some look to God and find promises that bring peace. It's the difference in feeling hopeless and hopeful. This is a story of hope and Good News for each of us. So, let's look at 3 insights we can gain from this scripture.

First, look at the word "remember." In his agony, the thief prayerfully pleads, "Jesus, remember me." Remembering here is not reminiscence. It is not a recollection of the past as we would do at a family reunion. In this instance, it means "Jesus, acknowledge me," "keep me in mind," "be mindful of me."

When Jesus used this word with his disciples He wanted them to be mindful of what they had seen Him do and acknowledge His authority and ability to provide for people's needs, like when he fed the 5000, or healed Jairus' daughter. In the sacrament of communion, we also reflect on Jesus' words, "Remember Me."

But when we're faced with crisis situations, don't we first look to our own resources, talents, and instincts? Then, when we can't find a solution on our own, where do we go? We say a desperate prayer. "Remembering Jesus" means to make prayer our first response, not our last resort.

The thief was willing to acknowledge Jesus' authority over his future. As a result, Jesus remembered or acknowledged him as he stepped from this life to the next. Surely the lesson for us here is if Jesus can solve the greatest problem of life into death, then surely He is able to deal with our other problems, too.

Second, let's look at the relationship between Jesus and the thief. This man hanging next to Jesus was the last friend Jesus had in this life. The disciples scattered when he was arrested. The mob, as well as the other thief, were taunting and belittling Jesus. This man did what a friend would do. He spoke words of kindness in support of Jesus crying out, "We are getting what our deeds deserve, but this man has done nothing wrong."

Yes, this last earthly friend of Jesus was a “sinner,” and no ordinary sinner; he was a crook! He wasn’t even an infamous crook. He was a nobody! Isn’t that ironic, because we know Jesus’ ministry included many such people. He “ate with sinners,” made friends with the down-trodden and outcast, and gave freely to those who were the nobodies of society.

So, it’s not surprising then Jesus is also the last friend this lowly thief had as he left this earth. Jesus told the penitent thief, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” The word “paradise” is a Persian word meaning, “walled garden.” It was a special honor to be invited to walk in the garden with the Persian king. Some biblical scholars believe the use of this word implies Jesus was promising the thief an honored place as a companion.

Isn’t that what we want, too? We want a faithful companion who will share our sorrows, encourage us, and love us unconditionally. Jesus promised His faithful companionship to the thief and He promises the same to us.

Which leads to my **third** insight. Why did Jesus befriend the robber? Why did he promise him they would share paradise together? This crook had nothing to offer Jesus, nothing to offer but himself fastened to a cross. He couldn’t share his faith; he couldn’t do good deeds; he didn’t know the Bible; he had never been baptized; and he could do none of the things some say we **MUST DO** if we’re going to heaven. But the thief knew one thing: he knew the heart of Jesus. And at the heart of Jesus is ... grace!

This whole subject of “death bed conversions” is always good for discussion! Why is it so controversial? For the same reason some people complain about the parable Jesus told (Matthew 20) about laborers being hired late in the day getting paid the same as those who were hired early in the day: “It isn’t fair!” However, grace isn’t measured by fairness, but by love.

Many polls have been published showing the majority of people in our culture believe in God. When asked how one gets to heaven to be with God after death, most will answer, “Well, if my list of good deeds is longer than my list of bad deeds, I’ll make it.” So, frantic efforts at being “good enough” drive these people through life and they are often burdened by fear and guilt each time a mistake is made. It’s not peaceful; and, friends, believe me, it’s not biblical.

Paul wrote to the Ephesians (2:8, 9) “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast.” Did you catch those key phrases? “By grace” -- which means an undeserved gift of God. “Through faith” -- which means trusting God will accept and forgive us because of our belief in Jesus Christ’s life and death on our behalf. You see, good deeds come out of our appreciation for God’s gift to us. Striving to know, love, serve and obey God better are important for growing our relationship with Him, but they are not a prerequisite for His love and acceptance.

Jay Kessler encapsulates this truth in one of my favorite quotes, “There is nothing you can do to make God love you any less, and there is nothing you can do to make God love you any more.” What God wants is that relationship with us. All

we have to do is choose it like this "nobody crook" did; the one who had the faith to say on his "death bed," "Remember me WHEN you come into your kingdom."

We don't always have the advantage of knowing when our life here will end, so waiting until we KNOW we're on our "death bed" is risky at best.

But much more than that:

Why would we want to live this life without this special friend?

Why would we want to choose to go it alone if we knew the power and presence of God in our lives was possible now?

Why would we want to live under the constant burden of being "good enough?" If it still doesn't make sense, maybe a true story* told by Ron Mehl will help.

A guy named Bob stopped at a garage sale one day. Before leaving he saw something in the rear of the garage ... a Harley-Davidson motorcycle! Bob bought the rusty, crusty old bike that didn't even run for \$35.

Bob took it home and called Harley-Davidson to see what a few major parts for restoration would cost. The clerk asked for the serial number. Bob waited a long time before the clerk returned. When he did, he sounded different and asked for Bob's name, address, and phone number. He said he would get back to him. Bob hesitated, but gave him the information. Later, he regretted it, thinking maybe the bike had been involved in some crime, or perhaps some Hell's Angel was on his way over to retrieve a stolen bike.

Two days later Bob received a call from a Harley executive. He asked Bob to take the seat off the bike and see if anything was written underneath.

Bob did as he was told, and returned to the phone. "Yes," he said, "it does have something written there. It's engraved, and it says, 'THE KING.' What's this all about?" demanded Bob.

The executive responded, "Bob, my boss has authorized me to offer you \$300,000 for the bike, payable to you immediately. Do we have a deal?" Bob told him he'd have to think about it. The next day Bob got a call from Jay Leno who explained he "had a thing about Harleys" and offered Bob \$500,000.

"The King" of course, was none other than Elvis Presley. The bike Bob had redeemed from the scrap heap for \$35 had once been owned by the "King of Rock 'n Roll" and it was worth over a half million dollars.

We're not told if Bob kept the bike or sold it to the highest bidder, but this is certain: the value of the motorcycle wasn't in the metal parts or its beauty. Its value wasn't determined by how well it performed, but that it had been owned by "the King." Ownership was *everything*.

And what is it that speaks most about your value and mine? Is it our job title or economic status? Is it determined by how we "perform?" No. when we choose to accept the gift of God's grace, we have worth and significance **because we belong to God**. We have been redeemed by God's own Son, our friend, at great price. He owns us. No one argues with the mark of "The King!"

That's why I can just see that thief walking into heaven, looking at all the surprised faces, and then pointing to Jesus and saying... "I'm with Him!"

(*From the book, More Stories for the Heart, compiled by Alice Gray.)