

THE UNLIKELY COMMUNITY OF THE CRUCIFIED

On my first day of college I was a mere 17 years old. During the orientation they gathered all the freshmen into the auditorium. After giving us all the rules and regulations, they told us to look at the person to our left, and then look to the person on our right. One of those people, they said, would not be here at the end of four years. Well, both the person on your left and the person on your right were looking at you, so just because you identified yourself as the one in the middle does not mean you will be the one to succeed. As it turned out, the one not there at the end was me.

This same scenario appears in the account of the crucifixion in Luke's gospel. Three men hung from crosses, all three condemned, but far from being equally guilty. In a Good Friday sermon to prisoners, the late Swiss theologian Karl Barth asked, "Which is more amazing, to find Jesus in such bad company or to find the criminals in such good company?"

Amazingly, Barth declared this unlikely company the first Christian community. My only hesitation with that statement is the inclusion into a Christian belief of the one who mocked Jesus. Surely his testimony to Jesus was not one of confession and belief but of unrepentance. Already a guilty man had been spared by Christ's conviction, but this one was not getting away.

We should pity him as we would anyone who refuses God's salvation act through Christ. Maybe he represents those who had a chance to choose and the choice was no. These two men whom history has seen fit to leave anonymous are known only as the one on the right and the one on the left. They could be anyone in the world, basically.

To quote Barth, "No one before and no one afterwards has witnessed so directly and so closely God's act of reconciliation, God's glory and the redemption of the world, as those two thieves. Consider the fact: Jesus died precisely for these two criminals who were crucified on his right and on his left and went to their death with him. He did not die for the sake of the good world, he died for the sake of an evil world, not for the pious, but for the godless, not for the just, but for the unjust, for the deliverance, the victory and the joy of all, that they might have life."¹

Both of them had equal access to the Savior of the world. Isaiah prophesied the scene, Christ being numbered with the transgressors or criminals. It was in this company that He could best serve His Father's purpose, could fulfill His role in the world. It would have taken cowardice or courage to mock Him, but perhaps it would take even more to put your trust in Him. Whatever the one on the right found believable in Christ was not evident to the other. It makes sense when you think about it; how many of us would look to another sinner of a way to overcome sin?

¹ <http://postbarthian.com/2015/04/29/criminals-karl-barth-sermon-basel-prisoners/>

True, we look to each other for forgiveness, but it is God who truly creates forgiveness. Forgiving others is just a first step. *“Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing.”* We were saved at the outrageous expense of a love that could not cease and would not abandon us. In refusing to save Himself Christ saved us. Responding, the other criminal spoke harshly to him, *“Don’t you fear God, seeing that you’ve also been sentenced to die? We are rightly condemned, for we are receiving the appropriate sentence for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong.”* Then he said, *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*

We are rightly condemned. He spoke for each of us, particularly those of us who are woefully aware of our own sinfulness. Perhaps the other man spoke for those who remain unaware or unafraid of their own sinfulness. The sinful looked to the sinless for a cure. *Jesus replied, “I assure you that today you will be with me in paradise.”*

Does the thought of fellowship refresh Jesus’ heart? Can He glimpse for a moment the joy of eternity with those He suffers for even now? Will His final hours before death be more tolerable recalling the penitent thief on His right, the first fruits of atonement? With me; never have such beautiful words been spoken.

Long ago God’s heart broke when He ushered His beloved children out of paradise into a fallen world. But now, in His second word from the cross, Jesus opens the door to the garden of God’s presence and lets one sinner in; a fitting reminder that soon the gates will be flung wide to all those who accept His sacrifice for their sins.²

Again I’d like to turn to the words of Karl Barth, this time from a Good Friday prayer. *“Under our own power, we could only be lost. And we have not deserved such a rescue – no, not one of us.”* Regardless of whether we were the one of His right or the one on His left, we did not deserve what we have been given. *“But in the inconceivable greatness of your mercy, you have shared our sin and our poverty, in order to do such a great thing for us.”*

Jesus had no reason to give up the glory that was His and come down to earth to lower Himself to our status; none, except to pluck us from the fire of torment and carry us to the safety of His Father’s house. *“How else could we thank you but to grasp, take up, and acknowledge this great thing?”*

In 16th century England, William Perkins, an alcoholic, was converted to Christ and eventually became a pastor. His compassion for criminals and vagabonds was boundless. Winning the respect of the jailers, he took great opportunity in ministering to prisoners. One day he accompanied a young man to the gallows. It was the custom for the condemned to address the crowd. But the young man, having climbed the ladder, merely lowered his head, pale and terrified.

² Rhodes, Tricia McCary, *Contemplating the Cross: A 40-Day Pilgrimage of Prayer*, pg. 123

“Are you afraid of death?” asked Perkins. “No,” replied the man softly, “Of something worse.” “Come down again then, and see what God’s grace will do.” The young man climbed down the ladder, and Perkins took his time explaining to him the forgiveness God offers. The man burst into tears and prayed earnestly. Then he wept again, this time out of joy as Perkins shared verses of eternal assurance.

Soon the young prisoner again mounted the ladder, this time with readiness, and he went to his death as though seeing heaven opened. The onlookers went home amazed, saying they had not been to a hanging but to a transfiguration.³

“How else should this happen, but that the same living Savior who suffered for us, was crucified, died, was buried, and also raised up, should now come into our midst, speak to our hearts and minds, open us to your love, and guide us to trust in it completely and to live by it and by it alone.”⁴

³Morgan, Robert J., *From This Verse: 365 Inspiring Stories About the Power of God’s Word*, August 22 entry

⁴Barth, Karl, *Fifty Prayers*, pg. 23