

Luke 23:27-43 Playing games?

Today we hear of our Lord's crucifixion. It is a hauntingly beautiful text. This is it, from Genesis to the Prophets and Kings and Sacrificial system, to the first Christmas to his ministry it all was always going to begin to reach it's zenith here at the cross. The world, the universe changes this day. I think it is safe to say that this then is a big deal, this is serious, this is not the time for playing games.

Except, when you read this text, well, everyone seems to be playing games. The soldiers are gambling away Jesus' clothes. Playing a game as three men are bleeding, gasping, and being tortured mere feet away from them. And they aren't the only ones having a laugh. Three times our text tells us Jesus is mocked. This is a joke to them. "Save yourself, save yourself, save yourself." Three times. Well, if it is all a joke, I'm not sure they liked the punchline. Because we of course know Jesus very well could have saved himself, but we also know he didn't come to save himself, he came to save you.

Which is why his continual refrain is not about himself, but about others. "Women, don't weep for me, weep for yourselves." "Father, forgive them." "Today, you will be with me in paradise." Three times they mock, three times he thinks of others. This is what he came for. To serve, to die, to save. Jesus isn't playing games.

Neither is that second thief on the cross as he nears his bitter end. He isn't playing anymore – he knows what he deserves, he knows what is coming, he knows what he needs. He needs Jesus.

And so do you.

And yet. And yet. Don't we play a whole lot of games with God?

We, who know what our Lord has done to win for us freedom and forgiveness, we still wonder, "Oh I fell back into that sin again, God must be mad at me." And we play these games where we bargain with him, "God I'll do my devotion and say my prayers every day now, I promise." And that lasts about 3 days, ya?

But look at that thief on the cross, he had a lifetime of sin and brokenness and does he even get the chance to go do seven good deeds to make it up – as if they ever could? No. His legs are broken and he suffocates on that cross that very day. And yet we know, by the promise of the Lord, that that thief is just fine – forgiven, and an heir of eternal life. Even though he had no bargaining chips to offer God.

So why do we think we have to bargain with God? He is not a vending machine that you have to push the right buttons, put in the right money, and give it a good shake to receive a gift. No, he gives the gift of forgiveness and life for free – take it!

And what does it mean to take it – to believe – to have faith! Is it just head knowledge – taking a quiz? Then what of the children, or those with dementia? Is it a feeling we have to muster up? But folks, no, Jesus is still King of kings whether you are depressed or happy. Don't let your feelings rob you of the reality of God's gifts. And that's what faith is, trusting that those gifts are a reality and for you. And so what does the thief ask "Jesus, remember me." His action, not the thief's, save. It's not our feelings, not our remembering that saves, it's his work, his promise to remember us that saves.

And it is a vain, painful, grievous evil that some out there spit on Jesus' gifts. Reject them, mock them. "Oh you dumb Christians believe in some flying spaghetti monster." Oh I don't think they will like the punchline of their joke. God cannot be mocked. Yet still others disregard his gifts, "Oh that bible isn't socially acceptable anymore, better cut some parts out of it, oh well I know it says that thing, but I heard a voice, or had a dream, or just feel different." Oh, I'm sorry I thought the word of the King was true.

So yes some think it is all a joke. But I don't think that is why you are here. And if it is, maybe it is time for you to give some real thought to the things eternal. Where did this all come from? Where is your life going to end up – in a grave – so maybe news that one conquered the grave is worth looking into.

But again I don't think that's why most of you are here – to see a joke. I think you are here because you know you need God's work for you. And we come to celebrate that he does have very real gifts, for you. Jesus told the thief as much. He tells him that the gifts Jesus wins on the cross, are his. The blood flowing that the thief could see with his own eyes, were for him. And he has promised that those gifts are yours as well. Which is why we gather here around those gifts, in Word, in Sacrament, and acknowledge that those are the ways God brings the cross of Jesus to you. It is not an accident the water washed on your head. It's not an accident should the bread and wine be on your lips. It's not accident you are hearing about his Cross for you, today. It's God's gifts for you.

And then we might say, "that's all well and good, but It still would be nice to have a promise like the thief did." And I would ask, "Oh, I'm sorry, you don't have a promise?"

For God so loved the world. And last I checked, you're in it. The promise is yours. Even more in our baptisms is a sign and seal and assurance of that, "Whoever has been baptized has put on Christ." Again in communion, "We proclaim his death until he comes and it is a participation in the body and blood." It's all those gifts once more, which are promises to you that you don't have to play the games anymore.

Even if others at the cross were playing games, no, we know this was no joke. The blood of God shed for you is not just one of any number of other things. It is creation changing, it is priceless, more than all the good works or money the world over could buy. Because it didn't have to be shed – Jesus didn't have to go there. He could have come down. He could have crushed us and wiped us out. That blood was innocent. And yet, he stayed on the cross that you might be his own. That you might receive his promise.

And so the question we must ask ourselves is: Is this a joke to you? Or is it real?

And if the events are real, Jesus actually died and rose, then the promise is real.

And if the promise is real then it is really for you.

That thief knew it was all real. Death was real, he was slipping into it. The fact that he deserved death was real, he confessed it as he drew nearer. But that man dying next to him was (and is) very real, as was his promise for that thief, as is his promise for you. A promise sealed in Jesus' victory over the cross and death.

Which is a resurrection so real his disciples, so scared, would go to their death's proclaiming it. And when the romans put swords and nails into them not one of them cried out, "Just kidding, stop, it's all a game!" Not one. Instead they all boldly confessed Christ as God and Lord of all even unto death, or should we say... unto paradise. A place where God will see all his people of faith, of promise,

to. And that's exactly who you, who have heard the Word and clung to it, are. God be praised, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.