



“The Crucified King”
Scripture – Luke 23:33-43
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, November 24, 2019

Episcopal Priest and renowned preacher Barbara Brown Taylor recalls watching a trio of white crosses spring up on a hillside by the highway.¹ Except, to put it more accurately, they didn’t really “spring up.” Erecting these crosses was a drawn-out task for someone. The first time Barbara drove by, there were just three posts that appeared to be growing out of the ground. The next time she passed, crossbeams had been added. A few days later, the crosses were painted white. And then, a few days after that, the finishing touch: a purple cloth was draped over the central cross.

As Barbara Brown Taylor watched this process unfold, she began to wonder: Why not stop with *one* cross? That would have been a lot less work. Would have gone faster. Would have gotten the same message across. Why construct *three* crosses on the hillside?

But, then, she realized something. One cross is *not* the same message as three crosses. “One cross makes a crucifix. Three crosses make a church.”²

All four Gospels agree that Jesus was not the only poor soul hung upon a cross that day. Each of the crucifixion accounts places him between two others who — like Jesus — were convicted of some crime and sentenced to death. The consistent testimony of the Gospel writers serves to remind Christians two-thousand years later how prevalent crucifixion was in the Roman Empire.

This gruesome death was not reserved for the Savior of the World. Far from it. It was reserved for every common criminal, every enemy of the state ... rabble-rousers, dissidents, pirates and thieves ... Certainly for defeated political leaders and kings, even those who kingship was the subject of debate (as it was for Jesus of Nazareth). It was not uncommon to see three or, even, thirty crosses clustered on a hillside or scattered along the road. For crucifixion was all about spectacle. It was a painful, shameful death intended to scare subjects of Rome into submission.

So, here we are — gazing upon a tragic tableau that seems to be an all-too-common scene of life, and death, under the Roman Empire.

Except that when we zoom in, when we get close enough to overhear the conversation between Jesus and the two criminals, we discover that this scene is not common at all. While all four Gospel evangelists agree that Jesus was not crucified alone, only Luke records a conversation between Jesus and the ones on his right and on his left. The

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999), 90.

² *Ibid.*

first criminal derides Jesus, saying: “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” He’s not alone in his taunts, of course. The leaders scoff at Jesus; the soldiers mock him. Shaming those condemned to the cross was part of the spectacle, remember? So it is not surprising that the so-called ‘King of the Jews’ would have to endure such taunting in his final hours, even from those suffering the same fate.

What is surprising is what happens next. “Do you not fear God?” says the other criminal. “*We* are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” And then this condemned criminal looks to the man in the middle, the one hanging under a sarcastic sign that reads ‘King of the Jews,’ and he pleads: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

This is all he asks: To be remembered. He does not ask for deliverance. He does not ask for the suffering to end. When the King of the Jews comes into his kingdom, this man just wants to be remembered. It seems so simple ... This plea from one suffering a disgraceful, painful death. And, yet, isn’t this the deep longing of so many in our world today? To be remembered?

Is this not the deep longing of those in our homeland who are convicted — sometimes *wrongly* convicted, as in the case of Christ — and left to rot in a prison cell? Is this not the deep longing of those in Jesus’ homeland, who still live under occupation and — like their ancestors — suffer the plight of food insecurity and take every step under the watchful eye of soldiers? Of those who seek a future of freedom and endure state-sanctioned violence? ... “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Is this not the longing of our neighbors who make their homes under overpasses or who move their families from church to church until they can, once again, afford to keep a roof over their heads? Or of those loved but lost to the grip of addiction, who can’t seem to break free from the stranglehold of opioids or alcohol? Or of sisters and brothers who are reeling from divorce, or grieving a diagnosis, or feeling deeply disoriented in a world once familiar? To some extent, is this not our common longing? ... “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Jesus — the One who came to seek and save the lost — responds to the criminal hanging beside him just as he responds to so many others throughout the Gospels ... He responds with mercy: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” Jesus responds with forgiveness, with compassion, with grace. He responds with love. Time and again, this is the power Christ chooses. He chooses love as he dines with sinners and tax collectors, as he heals a cast-out woman and restores her to community, as he spins stories of a shepherd scouring the wilderness for a single sheep and a parent welcoming the prodigal home. Even now, as he hangs upon a Roman cross, Jesus chooses the power of love.

It is a power the world doesn’t understand. To the leaders who scoff, to the soldiers who mock, to the criminal who calls upon Jesus to get them out of this mess, it just looks like weakness. It looks like impotence. And, yet, it is a power so threatening that the powers-that-be felt the need to crucify it, to nail the King of Love upon a cross as if a death-sentence could put an end to the whole thing.

But we know just how powerful love is. Three days later, we watch the One who was mocked by the imperial guard make a mockery of empire as he rises, victorious, from the grave. In that moment, and for all time, the King of kings and Lord of lords proves that love prevails. In the end, love wins.

Here’s the thing: If we truly believe this — if we truly believe in the power of love — how does this power rule our lives? This is the question for us today as we celebrate Reign of Christ Sunday: If we claim Jesus — the Crucified King — as Lord of our lives, how does this allegiance shape our witness here and now?

Well, it seems the conversation we overhear as we stand at the foot of the cross might have something to teach us. It teaches us that a church that professes a crucified king cannot shy away from the suffering of this world, but must respond as Jesus does: with forgiveness, with compassion, with grace. We are called to remember those the world seems to have forgotten, those who have been pushed to the margins and reduced to objects of derision. It teaches that we are set apart as the body of Christ to embody the power Jesus chooses: the power of love. As we pray and hope and work for Christ's kingdom to come right here on earth, we are sent to extend the promise of Christ: "Today, you will be with me in paradise."

Yes, some will mock us for following a first century radical who was executed by the state. Some will take their cue from the leaders and soldiers and, even, that criminal on the cross who scoffed at Jesus. Because the world still does not understand the power of self-emptying love. The world still sees it as weakness, as impotence, forgetting that love is the only power that ever truly wins.

But, if we claim Jesus as Lord, then we must lay claim to our calling to practice compassion, to remember the forgotten, to offer others a glimpse of paradise even in the midst of pain. If we follow a crucified king, then we must be a crucified church — people who pour themselves out in the name of love for the healing of the world. What was it that Barbara Brown Taylor said? "One cross makes a crucifix. Three crosses make a church."

Across our nation, across our world, the lost and the least are still pleading: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." The question is: How will we respond?

Will we point to the solitary crosses standing in our sacred spaces and say, "Jesus has it covered"? Or will we take up our crosses and follow the way of self-emptying love?

We know what we're called to do. And, thanks be to God, the church is already living into this calling amidst the lost and the least, the forlorn and the forgotten.

We see it as Christians with organizations like Churches for Middle East Peace listen for the voices of those suffering injustice in our holiest lands, and amplify their calls for peace. By visiting them, by praying for them, by sharing their stories, the global church assures sisters and brothers living under the threat of displacement and violence and scarcity that they are not alone. In coming alongside them, these disciples echo the promise of Jesus: In Christ's kingdom — You are remembered.³

We see it at our southern border, as baptized believers of different nationalities but common faith gather for worship on either side of the wall. Despite the metal fence running down the center of this multinational congregation, these citizens of Christ's kingdom share communion and pass the Peace of Christ by touching their fingertips through the holes in the fence. And, as these Christians in Mexico and the United States worship our crucified and risen king together, they proclaim through their witness and work: In Christ's kingdom — You are remembered.⁴

And we see it here — do we not? Every time our congregation transforms a classroom into a bedroom, so that families without homes have a place to lay their heads until they get back on their feet. And every time our members sit beside children from Urban Promise to help with homework and swap stories and nurture relationships that confound the world. And every time we show up at the retirement home with flowers or communion to remind God's beloved children that the church loves them, too. Yes, in all these things, we strive to proclaim to any who know that deep longing, to any who have whispered that criminal's final plea: In Christ's kingdom — You are remembered.

³ Churches for Middle East Peace (<https://cmep.org/about/>)

⁴ Experience shared by a colleague in ministry.

If we follow a crucified king, then we must be a crucified church — pouring ourselves out for the healing of the world. After all, one cross makes a crucifix. Three crosses make a church. May we be a community that responds as Christ does ... with forgiveness, with compassion, with grace. And, above all else, with love.

Prayers of the People – Sudie Niesen Thompson

(This prayer includes petitions borrowed from the *Book of Common Worship* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2018).

Sovereign God — in whom we live and move and have our being — you reign o'er all creation; you are Lord of our Lives.

In this season of gratitude, we praise you for the blessings of our lives and give thanks for glimpses of grace in moments both extraordinary and ordinary.

We are grateful for loved ones — for circles of support and the fellowship of friends.

We are grateful for opportunities to gather — around tables that remind us of your bounty, in communities that embody your care.

We are grateful, O God, for your love that binds all things together.

As we pause to remember the blessings we enjoy, we are mindful — too — of all that is not as it should be and remember before you those who yearn for your care:

For those who are hungry, we pray for nourishment ...

For those who are fleeing, we pray for safety ...

For those who are ill, we pray for your healing ...

For those who are grieving, we pray for your peace ...

For those who are suffering, we pray for your presence ...

For those who are divided, we pray for unity ...

For those who are isolated, we pray for connection ...

For those who are afraid, we pray for your courage ...

For those who are despairing, we pray for new hope ...

Sovereign God — in whom we live and move and have our being — fill us with compassion and grace, that we might pour ourselves out in love for the sake of the world.

By your Spirit, empower your church in every land to bear witness to our crucified and risen Lord, as we watch and work for your reign of justice and peace.

This we pray in the name of your Son, our Lord, who gave us words to pray: **Our Father ...**

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.