

“Awakening Possibilities”
Sermon by Katherine Raley
Good Friday, March 29, 2013

Luke 23:43; Luke 23:35-43

And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

There’s an acronym that’s popular among weekly workers, and schoolchildren, anyone really for whom the weekend is a relief. It was the branding of a set of TV programming for a while. TGIF. Thank God it’s Friday. It seems like an odd phrase to bring up on *this* Friday. *This* Friday we remember the suffering of our Lord and Savior – *this* Friday that the Gospel of Mark details by every three hours when Jesus is condemned, put on a cross, speaks his last words, and dies with a shuddering of the world. And yet, we know it as Good Friday.

By calling it Good Friday, we’re implying a definite change of meaning of the word “good.” Certainly, the events of Good Friday seem ironically...well...bad. So why don’t we call it Bad Friday? Because Jesus redefined success on the cross. Hold that thought in your mind for the next few minutes – that a man condemned to die on a cross *did not fail*, but instead *redefined the very notion of success* though the very things that seemed to make him a failure. Jesus redefined success on the cross.

“Today you shall be with me in paradise.” Words of Christ spoken to the dying man beside him. Words of hope. Many have also attached the word “salvation” to these words – salvation being the joining with Christ in eternal life, joining with Christ in his kingdom, joining with Christ in Paradise. If this man experienced salvation as he was dying next to the Messiah, what do Christ’s words mean to us now, we who are living, we who may or may not have already put our hopes in the faith that we, too, shall join Christ in his kingdom?

How do *we* think about salvation?

Let’s look at this story for some possible perspectives on salvation. What do we find there?

There’s the perspective of the leaders, the soldiers, and the 1st thief, the first malefactor. “Save yourself!” they say. If you are the Messiah, if you are the chosen one of God, you can change your fate and save yourself from dying on the cross. Salvation for these is continued existence on this earth, being saved from death.

And then we have the 2nd thief, who the text says rebukes the first saying “Do you not fear God?” He might be saying something like “Look, we’re already in a bad situation, don’t make it worse! We are condemned in this world, but maybe there is still hope for the next.” He turns to Jesus and says “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.” For this man, salvation seems to simply mean peace in another world. He does not ask to *be* with Jesus, but to be assured that *God* will think of him; will regard him with grace.

I want to focus in on another perspective – Jesus’ perspective of salvation. The living salvation that Jesus offered in his ministry and to this thief.

The leaders, soldiers, and first thief got it wrong. They viewed salvation entirely in terms of continuation of life. We have some evidence that Jesus thought of it differently. Not only did he *not* save his life, but the life that he lived concerned justice for the people of Israel, justice for the marginalized, feeding the stomachs *and* souls of people who were hungry. The salvation that Jesus offered, the salvation that Jesus lived, was not about the continuation of life on earth. Jesus did not measure salvation by the length of his life, but by *the spiritual awakening he restored in others*. Restored in the people Israel through the forgiveness of sins, including the marginalized, feeding the hungry, and then dying the death of a witness to all of these forms of justice. Restored in the man hanging next to him who only wanted to be remembered. Restored in the world as we believe and follow *His love*.

Where do we put our emphasis as we live our lives in this present world? In working for our spiritual salvation, how do we measure success?

I recently saw a talk by a conductor of an orchestra, Benjamin Zander, who speaks on the power of classical music. I watched the talk, and his points about classical music were beautiful, but what really stuck with me about this very enthusiastic conductor were the last few minutes of the talk when he described the specific changes that music had given him. He described the realization that, as a conductor, he was usually the face of the orchestra, and yet, he didn't make a sound. Instead, *his* power comes *through* the power of others, the power of those he's conducting. He realized that his power, his *success*, comes through **awakening possibility** in others. When he realized that, he started to think of success differently. Instead of measuring how many compliments he got, he looked at the eyes of the players in his orchestra. He knew that he

was awakening possibility in them by the way that their eyes shined. If their eyes weren't shining, he knew that *he* was doing something wrong. Who was *he* being, he asked himself, that his players' eyes weren't shining.

When his players eyes shined and when he had a part in awakening possibility in them, the music they all made together was more beautiful than anything that could have come out of eyes that were bored, or eyes that were resigned, or eyes whose only goal was to play the right notes.

Looking at the life of Jesus through the lens of this definition of success shows some pretty amazing things. When you do, you see that to Jesus, true success comes from awakening possibility. During his life on earth, Jesus gave thousands of people hope both in their spirits *and* in their physical existence. People followed him from place to place because they wanted to hear his teaching, and they wanted the healing that he could give. He taught them that anything was possible with just the faith of a mustard seed. It wasn't an empty promise – the gospels show him saying again and again “your faith has made you well.” He taught them that the storm could be stilled. He taught them that food could be multiplied to feed as many people as it needed to. He taught them that love could overcome the injustice of an empire. The way that the Romans treated Israel *was not* the last word. The way that the Israelites treated the Samaritans *was not* the justice of God. No. God's love rules over all of that. And it rules over us as well. Jesus redefined the meaning of success. No longer was it getting rich and gaining more power with the empire. No. It became awakening possibility for *anyone* to love and be loved by God. It was for *all* to be forgiven their sins. It was for the crippled, blind, sinful, impoverished,

diseased, rich, powerful, righteous, and condemned to find restoration in the awakened possibility of love *of* God and neighbor and love *from* God and neighbor. Jesus' success was awakening possibility. The salvation that Jesus gave was awakened possibility. It was making his followers' eyes shine with reflection of God's love. He did it in his ministry, and he did it on a cross.

How do we measure success when we consider salvation? Is it by "waking up" in heaven after we take our last breath here on earth, joining Jesus in Paradise? Or is it through the shiny eyes of the people with whom we interact here on earth?

What would we change in our lives if we thought of salvation as *both*?

Jesus *will* remember you in his kingdom. You will be with Jesus in Paradise on that day when you take your last breath on this earth. But who will you be until then? How will you live out your salvation in *this* world?

When I think of the times that I have felt *awakened*, inspired, music and art come to mind first. A beautiful piece of music, the talent of the individual players, or just a song on the radio with an uplifting beat will often make me feel better about the world and my place in it. Beauty is everywhere, I am reminded, I just have to open my eyes to it. When I think about how *I* might awaken possibility in others, though, I have to look in other places. I am not a musician, or an artist. I am part of a choir, but in that role I rarely have the chance to see the eyes or the faces of the people who are listening to know whether they are being awakened or not. Instead of in that type of art, I look at the more personal interactions I have with people. Sometimes, I see awakened possibility in other's eyes when I'm smiling as I walk down the sidewalk and someone smiles in return. Or when I'm wearing my sock-monkey hat with the ears sticking out that makes children

and adults alike grin. But one of the most memorable moments of making someone's eyes shine was shortly after I had moved to Colorado, and I was sitting with my new next door neighbor while we got to know one another. I told her that I was a minister and told her about my slow journey to recognizing that call in my life. As I spoke, her eyes and her face took on the glow of awakened possibility. She told me that she had never met a woman minister before. She had thought about it briefly in high school, but had just assumed that it was something she couldn't do. She had found her passions in other things. It was a beautiful moment for me. Just by following God's call for my life, I made someone's eyes shine. I awakened a possibility in my new friend's life.

Where do you see awakened possibilities? The opportunity is everywhere. In a student learning how to read. In an artist being given the materials she needs to create. In a musician being given the instruments he needs to make music. In *you* as you look at a painting that fills you with life, or a song that seems to energize the blood flowing through you.

Awakening possibilities.

When a child sees a woman minister for the first time and realizes with excitement that God might call *her*, too.

When a choir director steps in front of her choir and through her leadership gives them the confidence of creating their ability to join together in songs that give God praise.

When a piano teacher sits with a new student and shows him the power that his fingers contain. Encouraging him when he gets the notes wrong.

When a teacher patiently explains a concept over and over again in as many ways as necessary to bring the glow of understanding to his student's eyes.

When a volunteer at Ecumenical Social Ministries tells a client that they don't have to be hungry that night. Or brings out shoes that will keep his feet warm. Or when the client realizes that she will be treated with love and respect when she comes through those doors.

It is a Christ-like gift to awaken possibility in other people. It is the gift of joining him in salvation *both* in this world and in Paradise.

Christ awakened possibility in the man dying next to him on the cross. Not only was that man confident that he could dare to ask Jesus to remember him *because of the way that Jesus lived*, but Jesus also opened up to him a possibility that he might not have dreamed of. What do you think his eyes look like when Jesus told him that he would be with him in Paradise? I bet they were shining with possibility. Live out your salvation by being Christ-like, and make your measure of success the number of possibilities that you awaken.

Amen.