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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
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Holy Friday at First Presbyterian Church
San Anselmo, California

Luke 23:35-43

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

My message is about pardon: How God pardons people in Jesus Christ.

The vignette in this story is Jesus on the cross flanked by crosses on which two criminals hang. All are condemned to die and these are their final hours.

One criminal joins the scoffing and mocking of the crowd by deriding the Savior of the world. He says: “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

The story continues: “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 answers with some of the most amazing words in scripture and a pardon that knocks the socks off our feet. It’s amazing grace to the n^{th} degree. He replies: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

This is “one” of the “words” in the pantheon of Christ’s seven last words. “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” The man will be dead in a few hours and immediately he will be with Jesus in heaven. Excellent.

There was a cartoon in the Chronicle this week of a couple entering a room and there’s an elephant in the room. One says to the other: “I thought you were speaking metaphorically.”

While we totally appreciate Jesus’ words to the kindly criminal we wonder about Jesus’ response to the elephant in the room which is the other criminal, the one who derides. What does Jesus give him? What *can* we say when people misunderstand, mistreat, abuse and mock us? Jesus is silent.

Jesus could have spoken back. He could have been cutting, sarcastic and damning. He remains silent, as he had done before those who accused and tried him. How is this as powerful as the verbal pardon he gives the other criminal? – For we trust that Jesus is quite intentional about these final moments of his life.

The French movie, "Of Gods and Men" provides a clue. Cistercian monks in a monastery in North Africa minister caringly and inclusively to a local Muslim community. Jesus is present in the daily liturgy and in the lives of the monks.

It's a true story. In the course of their work a fundamentalist Islamic group terrorizes the region, killing foreign workers, violently forcing the locals to adhere to their religion and beating women for not wearing veils and for not covering their bodies with full dress.

I won't give the story away except to say that this terrorizing group seeks the monastery doctor to give aid to one their wounded. The government encourages the monks to leave the country for their safety. Their decision to leave or stay is the subject of the movie and I'll leave the outcome for you to see.

There is a point in the movie where the Abbot is asked to identify a dead man thought to be the leader of the Mujahedeen who earlier visited the monastery. In the earlier visit the Abbot quotes from the Koran to the delight of the Muslim leader. The Abbot is escorted into the mortuary by a government military person and they go to the body lying under a white sheet.

The Abbot stands over the body and when he recognizes the man he makes the sign of the cross which upsets the military leader.

Like Jesus on the cross, the Abbot didn't say anything. Here was a man as misguided, abusive and violent as the cruel criminal on the cross with Jesus and the Abbot in silence offers him the sign of the cross.

Jesus on the cross is that sign on that dark day outside Jerusalem. His hanging on the cross was sufficient. The cross will ease burdens and lessen pain. The cross will heal.

And so we face our world.

- We confirm Jesus' words from the cross by assuring people of God's pardon for those seeking pardon.
- We show the cross, or make the sign of the cross, to and for abusers, pain-givers, mockers, deriders and killers and hope they see Jesus suffering with them and come to know pardon for all they have said and done.
- We bear the cross by being silent or speaking out in the face of abuse, praying for everyone, doing the tough work of peace and justice, and caring by listening and perhaps confronting.

"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." We thank God for what was said and not said by Jesus from the cross on that dark and dismal day. Amen.