

Learning from the Death of Jesus

Luke 23:32-46

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Passion Sunday

32 Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 33 When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. 34 Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' And they cast lots to divide his clothing. 35 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!' 36 The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, 37 and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' 38 There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews.'

39 One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' 40 But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' 42 Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' 43 He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'

44 It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, 45 while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. 46 Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' Having said this, he breathed his last. (NRSV)

In this series on death and dying, we've thought theologically about funerals, explored the pathway of grief, heard stories of loss and thought about responding to loss, and last Sunday, named some ways to prepare for our own dying. One important topic still remains for us, and that's to think a little today about how Jesus handled his own death. I want to focus on two related questions: What steps did Jesus take to die well? And what can we learn from him about how we can die well?

But before we get into that, I want to set aside a misconception that a lot of us fall into way too easily. It's this. Some of us like to linger in a macabre way over the nasty details of Jesus' crucifixion. We focus in detail on the whipping he received, on the nails pounded into his body, on the process of asphyxiation, and on other intense agonies of getting crucified. I confess that I too have been guilty of taking this approach sometimes in my preaching.

But let's be honest with ourselves and admit that Jesus' crucifixion was not uniquely painful. Yes, his was a nasty way to die, but so are a lot of other deaths. Think of bone cancer, which can be a very painful way to die. Or think of dying in war. I recently read a brief history of trench warfare in World War I. Frequently men would get wounded in those trenches, but because of the logistics of trench war, no medical help was immediately available. Consequently wounded men lay where they fell, suffering in intense agony from their wounds, sometimes for days. Then maybe they'd finally die; but with bullets still flying through the air, no one could get their dead bodies out of the trench. So there the dead bodies stayed to decompose and putrefy, while living soldiers

continued fighting around them. The point is that millions of people have died in nasty ways, and Jesus was neither the first nor the last one to do so. The kind of suffering Jesus felt on the cross was not unique. Instead what was unique about his death was *who* died.¹ It was *Jesus* who died, or to word it differently, that day on the cross something died *within God*. A part of God was killed—and that is what makes the cross such a pivotal event.

With that clarification in place, let's return now to our two questions. What steps did Jesus take to die well? And what can we learn from this about how we too can die well? To explore this I want to focus on the single passage from Luke that we heard a few minutes ago. In this passage I notice that while he is dying on the cross, Jesus says only three sentences to others around him, and I want to suggest that each of these three sentences tells us something useful about how to die well.

The first sentence Jesus utters is: "God, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (v. 34). In his dying moments, Jesus asks God to forgive the people who are harming him. This isn't some vague, vacuous platitude. Instead this is a specific request tailored to the context at hand. The people Jesus has in mind are the ones who arrested him and sentenced him to die. He's explicitly referring to the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem, and to the Roman political leaders in Jerusalem. They are the ones Jesus wants God to forgive.

Notice Jesus isn't exactly asking for reconciled relationships. Reconciliation, when it happens at all, usually takes multiple steps and comes as the end result of a long process. Reconciliation is not something Jesus can achieve at this moment, because Pontius Pilate and the high priest are not present here at the cross. They're elsewhere in the city, out of earshot. Moreover, at this moment in time the high priest and Pilate aren't interested in being reconciled to Jesus. They want him to die so they can get this over with and move on to the next item on their to-do lists. Therefore Jesus' options for reconciliation are limited. He probably wants reconciliation, but it just isn't possible due to the contingencies of the present moment. How can you be reconciled with people who aren't around and don't want reconciliation anyway?

In spite of this, Jesus does have at least one option available to him. He can ask God to forgive them. Working to forgive—and make no mistake, forgiving often takes hard work—is generally one of the earlier steps in the longer process of reconciliation. I'm intrigued that Jesus doesn't offer his own forgiveness; he doesn't say "I forgive them for what they've done to me." No, he asks *God* to forgive them. I don't know why Jesus worded it this way, but I wonder if the human side of him was simply in too much pain. Is

¹ Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 52.

it possible that he felt so abandoned by God, and so shafted by the Jerusalem authorities, that he wasn't psychologically and spiritually in a place where he could give his own forgiveness? In any case, his petition for God to forgive does communicate a certain compassion.

Maybe it will be like that for you too on your dying day. On the final day of your life, maybe you too will have broken relationships somewhere which cannot now be reconciled. There is no longer enough time for that because your death is at hand. Some of the people you have broken relationships with might already be dead themselves. Others might be in a faraway place not now accessible to you. Maybe you did try reconciliation with them but they spurned your overtures. Or perhaps you never got around to the reconciliation you knew would have been desirable. Whatever the case, being reconciled with them is no longer possible. You don't have time anymore.

Yet like Jesus, you can still forgive them. Imagine yourself lying there in your deathbed. Perhaps you too can quietly whisper, "God, I forgive them." Or if you're not in the mood for that, you can take the option Jesus took and say, "God, you forgive them." Even if the words never cross your lips, they can cross your mind, so that God who hears all can receive your prayer gracefully.

The second sentence Jesus utters to the criminal on the neighboring cross. "Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (v. 43). Here is a remarkable—and to my mind, astonishing—act of extending grace to someone else. Just moments before, this criminal admitted he had done something wrong which deserved this crucifixion. But other than that, there's nothing in the story to suggest that this criminal has jumped through the usual hoops we say people have to jump through if they want to be saved. This man has not spoken the so-called sinner's prayer. He has made no overt confession of faith in Jesus. He has not done anything saintly, as far as we know. He clearly hasn't lived a lifetime of virtue. The only thing he asks of Jesus is to "remember me when you come into your kingdom" (v. 42). It's just one small petitionary prayer that asks the tiniest of favors. The request isn't to "forgive me" or "save me" or "give me eternal life." Just "remember me," and nothing more.

Even so, for Jesus it's enough to make a big deal out of. The criminal makes one tiny gesture toward Jesus and Jesus responds in unmerited grace with a favor much bigger than the man asked for. Jesus will not simply remember him in Paradise—he promises the man will actually join him in Paradise. Whew! Jesus offers the man eternal friendship. Eternal community. Eternal communion.

We're not Jesus, and we don't have the power to promise Paradise to anyone. But we can offer our friendship to the people around us as we lay dying. Picture yourself in the room of your death. What would it look like in your dying days to offer your

friendship to someone else in the room? Like Jesus, you might be in significant pain. Like Jesus, you may not be long for this world. Death might be hovering at the foot of your bed. Yet even so, you may have a chance to offer someone the grace of your friendship. And who knows? Perhaps you will later be friends with that person in Paradise.

The final sentence to pass the lips of Jesus is this: “God, into your hands I commend my spirit.” For this verse I like the NIV better which says, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” The very last thing Jesus does before he dies is to place his spirit into the hands of God. His final act is to entrust himself into God’s eternal care. What a great way to end a life! To gently, willingly release yourself into God’s safekeeping. To lie there in your bed and let yourself slip away into the vast embrace of God.

You can actually begin this prayer now—you don’t have to put this off until your dying days. I’ve prayed these words of Jesus on and off for years, often while walking outside. In our neighborhood is a large circle 1.1 miles long. A number of us in this congregation walk that circle for exercise—Lori Good, Abbe and Patrick Buller, and others. When I walk it, I often take this prayer of Jesus with me. As I stride I’ll repeat over and over, “God, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Sometimes I’ll change the words to “God, into your hands I commit my work” or something else like that. I might say it several hundred times in 20 minutes of walking.

I can’t be sure, but I think doing this has been a small yet important way of preparing for my own death. Over the years it’s instilled in me a sense of what the Anabaptists called *Gelassenheit*, or yieldedness to God. For sure it’s given me a greater awareness of God caring for me, of God taking care of me. It reminds me that my life is not my own. Ultimately my life does not belong to me. It belongs to God. I am only God’s servant, asked to do things that ordinarily I would not have chosen to do on my own, but now I do them because God is wiser than I am.

See yourself in the final moments of your life. Your breathing is becoming shallow. Your eyes are growing dim. Your body is weak. Your heart is beating a bit irregularly. You are starting to slip away from the cares and concerns of this life. Like Jesus, you too can whisper: “God, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

Heck, why not start now? Right now, how can you start praying and living and working as if your life is not yours, but as if your life belongs to God? It really does belong to God, you know. So how can you live and pray into that reality? What will help you to entrust yourself to God’s eternal care?

It could be one of the best ways to prepare for your own death.