

April 7, 2020

Dear Sunday School Class,

As we gathered this past Sunday via a Zoom meeting (Thank you Matt for setting it up) we continued with Andy Stanley's study, and he took us through a look at one of the thieves who was crucified next to Jesus. The story of this thief is from Luke 23:33-43.

The first part of the study was a look at the fact that the week before the crucifixion Jesus entered Jerusalem as they were getting ready to celebrate Passover to shouts of adoration from a mob of people who were ecstatic to see Him, and laid palm branches before Him as they shouted "Hosanna" because they believed Him to be the Messiah. (Matthew 21) From there Jesus went to an upper room and ate His last supper with His disciples, and washed their feet. This is what the church celebrates as Maundy Thursday.

Unfortunately, we see another mob scene the very next day on Good Friday when Jesus is being crucified, and the mob is now cursing him and spitting on Him, and He is being beaten and mocked. (Matthew 27)

The class discussed the idea of a mob mentality, and how just about everyone can get caught up emotionally when a mob arises. Someone mentioned how easy it is to be part of a mob at a football game when your team wins and everyone storms the field. The other side of the mob mentality is a time in our past history when Hitler would excite a mob into an evil frenzy, and the people followed his insanity. At any mob scene, we lose our ability to act wisely, and act from emotion. Emotion can lead us to a frenzy; good or bad, and we are all susceptible, because most of the time we view life with our emotions.

Andy then talked about the thief who was crucified next to Jesus. And Andy inserts a fact most of us didn't know, which is that the Romans crucified criminals about 6" above ground level, not up high as we see in the movies and in pictures of Jesus on the cross, that way the people who were there were at eye level with those being crucified, and could humiliate and physically abuse them up close and personal. How extra horrible that must have been. We don't know the thief's name, or even his crime, but he had to be very evil to be considered for crucifixion. Yet he was drawn in by Jesus' response to the ugly crowd and what they were doing to Him. Jesus was praying for His abusers, saying "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." Luke 23:34. Then as that thief rebuked the other thief for his verbal abuse of Jesus, he evidently realized who Jesus was and said to him, "Jesus remember me when You come in Your kingdom." Jesus replied to him without hesitation, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise." What a beautiful conversion of a horrible sinner, and what a merciful and loving response from Jesus.

So how does that equate to us? Sadly, we often put ourselves in the "pretty good people" category, and think we are above the mob and the thief, when in reality we were a part of the menacing, sinful crowd, and we could easily have been the thief beside Jesus. If we don't believe that, we haven't read our Bibles. "there are NONE righteous, NOT ONE." "ALL have sinned and come short," "our righteousness is as filthy rags." The scripture shows us that we are horrific sinners along with the very worst of the mob, and the thief. Our anger is murderous, our criticism is condemnatory, our "white lies" are black and fraudulent, etc. etc. etc. Our hearts are so deceitful they tell us we are "good" when we are not. We are great about pointing out the sin in others, especially when they come short of our expectations, when in reality our pointing out others' sin is self-righteous snobbery, which is what Jesus accused the Pharisees of. Not to be the bearer of bad news, but God tells us over and over we need a Savior because we are horrible, evil sinners, not because we are sweet, loving, giving people, because at heart we aren't. We don't have ANY righteousness in us, and the only thing that makes us worthy of saving and going to Heaven in any way is accepting Jesus' substitutionary death for us on that cross.

So this Holy week is a great time for us to reflect on our own lives, and where we need forgiveness, and what sins we are glossing over, and refusing to admit. We should spend some time in prayer, asking God to show us specifically where we need to allow Him to change us, and continually redeem us from our haughty self-image. These are harsh truths for us to absorb, but necessary, if we want to be more like Him.

The end of the lesson pointed us toward the cross, and what Jesus did for the thief, and looking ahead, for us. The thief didn't have time to change his life, it was over. But he reached out to Jesus, and Jesus reached back to Him in absolution and love. Jesus will do the same for us. In spite of our blackest heart of sin, if we reach out to Him, He cleanses us, and says to us, "you will be with me in Paradise." What a promise!!!

I can't help but think of the great hymn

*"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God, a bulwark never failing.  
Our Helper He amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.  
For still our ancient foe, doth seek to work us woe.  
His craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate,  
On earth is not his equal.  
Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing;  
Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing.  
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus it is He, Lord Sabaoth His Name,  
From age to age the same. **And He must win the battle.**"*

See you on Sunday morning at 9:30 a.m. Have a blessed week.

Be sure and listen to Pastor Seng's Easter message!!!

*Judy & Stephen*