

From Alienation to Inclusion  
Nashville UCC, April 7, 2019

Two men were crucified with Jesus, one on his right and one on his left (Luke 23:32-33, 39-43). We don't know their names. We don't know where they came from, or who their parents were. We don't know how much schooling they had, or what they did for a living. All that we know about them is that Luke called them "criminals." But that word "criminals" actually tells us quite a lot about those two men who were crucified with Jesus on Good Friday.

The gospel stories in Matthew and Mark tell us that they were thieves – robbers, men who take what is not theirs by stealth or by force. But in this text, Luke uses a different word. In the Greek, it literally means "workers of evil." There is a big difference between those two Greek words. A thief might have an unselfish motivation for what he does. He might, for instance, steal a loaf of bread to feed his starving family. But an "evil-doer" has only selfish motives. The Greek word that Luke uses to describe them was only used for someone who was *morally* evil, and whose actions reflected the evil in their soul. Adolph Hitler, the man who tried to exterminate anyone who wasn't just like he was, was that kind of evil-doer. So was the serial killer Ted Bundy, who murdered more than 30 young women and girls; and the Roman emperor Nero, who set people on fire to be human torches to light up his evening dinner parties. The word "criminal," as the Greek word is usually translated, is only a shadow of the real meaning of that word.

They are evil-doers, both of them, with souls as rotten as month-old garbage. And one of them behaves just as we expect him to behave: he joins the crowd in mocking Jesus. Through his pain, and with the little breath he has left, he cries at Jesus with indignation, "What kind of Messiah are you, anyway? You're no good to anybody. Save yourself. Save us. For God's sake, save us!" He really doesn't care a fig about Jesus' well-being; he only cares about escaping the cross in any way that he can. But it comes to nothing in the end, because that's what happens to all evil-doers sooner or later. Crucified he was, and crucified he stayed, right there beside Jesus.

The other evil-doer, though, steps out of character. "You've got a lot of nerve!" he tells his fellow evil-doer. "You don't respect anybody, do you? We're getting exactly what we deserve. But this man – he hasn't done a thing." He turns his head slowly, painfully, so that he can look into the eyes of Jesus. "I know that you really are a king," he says. "Think about me when you inherit your kingdom!" Speaking has taken all the energy that he has; and his head sags in pain and exhaustion. He doesn't expect a reply. But Jesus does reply. "Believe me when I say that today we will be together in Paradise."

That response of Jesus has bothered people for centuries. Surely Jesus doesn't mean it! After all, this man has done evil all his life. His soul is rotten, and he is full of all the nasty qualities that accompany evil. Why, he has probably done every one of the seven deadly sins: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth. There is absolutely nothing to make him or his life acceptable to Jesus; but Jesus accepts him anyway. What in the world is going on?

I'll tell you what's going on. Jesus is in the reconciling business. He reconciles people to God; and he reconciles people to one another. If he had a business card, it might read, "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Reconciler." The people of Jesus' time thought that the Messiah would take power like an earthly king. But earthly kings don't care much about reconciling. Earthly kings make people follow the law, and punish them if they disobey. Earthly kings protect what power they have, and they often use force to do it. An earthly king would have come down off his cross, and whacked all the people who put him there. But Jesus didn't do any of those things, because none of those things were in Jesus' job description. The job of the Messiah is to reconcile people to one another by showing them how to accept one another and how to live with one another. And so, when the second evil-doer made his feeble plea to Jesus – "Remember me when you come into your kingdom" – Jesus modeled reconciliation by responding, "We're friends. I won't forget you. Starting right now, we're going to be together. You're going wherever I go; and I'm going to Paradise. Come on in!"

Friends, we aren't very different from those evil-doers. In the souls of every single one of us, there is something rotten. We like to think that we're good people – and for the most part, we are – but there's that *one little place* that stinks to high heaven! There's a corner of envy, a pocket of greed, or a little piece of pride that we can't get rid of, no matter how hard we try. And those rotten little corners alienate us from one another. Our envy holds us apart from one another when we should be drawing closer together; our greed keeps our hands tightly curled into fists when they should be extended in generosity; and our pride lies to us, convincing us that we are entitled to whatever we have while other people aren't. In some way, great or small, we are all evil-doers. But the good news is that Jesus will help us to reconcile with one another if we will only follow his teaching that love, mercy, generosity, compassion, and humility are the ways to live a full life. And the *better* news is that Jesus has *already* reconciled us with God through his death on the cross! We are no longer alienated with our Creator! In fact, God invites us into Paradise if we will only accept the invitation.

Let me leave you with an image. When we ask Jesus, "How much do you love me?" he opens his arms wide and responds, "This much!" It is because he loves us *this much* that he allowed himself to be nailed to a cross. It is because he loves us *this much* that he invited an evil-doer to go with him to Paradise; and it is because he loves us *this much* that he invites us to step into Paradise with him. If you feel alienated today, come to Jesus. When you do, you won't find judgement; you'll find only love. He's waiting to welcome you! Thanks be to God!