



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

The Power of Forgiveness

November 24, 2019

Christ the King Sunday

Text: Luke 23: 33-43

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. [[Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’]] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. 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.’



Sermon:

The power of magic is a sight to behold. Magicians, illusionists—can do amazing things—or at least seemingly so, as they make things appear or disappear—violating the very laws of nature. They conjure blatant deceptions right under our noses or in front of our eyes. At the heart of what the magicians refer to as the “method,” is simply misdirection. It relies on the fact that our brains have limited abilities to focus and pay attention. So, if they can keep you focused on only one thing—that makes you oblivious to all the other things happening that normally would seem obvious.

In 1999, psychologist Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris at the University of Illinois carried out a remarkable study. They made a video in which there were two groups of three students each, standing in the elevator lobby of a dorm. One group was dressed in white tee shirts; the other in black tee shirts. Each group had a basketball, and they moved around that lobby passing the ball to each other, weaving in and out. The simple question posed to the people who were supposed to watch was: “Please count the number of passes carried out

only by the team dressed in white tee shirts.” So, for the next minute and a half, this hilarious scene unfolds as they weave in and out, making passes as you keep focusing on where the white team is and who passed the last ball? All of a sudden, in the middle of the video, a person dressed in a gorilla suit walked out from one side of the lobby right into the middle of it all, then turned to the camera, beating his chest, and then kept on walking out the other way. The truth is that nearly everyone who watched got it right—that is, in terms of how many passes they were making. But a full 50% of the students that were studied never even saw the gorilla. They were so focused on the task at hand that despite this gorilla walking through the scene, even pausing in front of the camera to beat his chest, never even entered their line of sight.

Where we place our attention determines what we notice. Where we look for power is where we will see it. Right now many power struggles are taking place in many capitals of the world, including our own. And there are many people vying for power who, like the magicians, are attempting to divert our attention. So, keep focused. But I want to look further at today’s passage, for this same concept is in play on this Reign of Christ Sunday or Christ the King Sunday. This day that is set aside that we might remember what true power looks like and how Christ manifested his power. We are finishing up with Luke’s gospel this year. Luke’s Gospel is the Gospel of *amazement*. You will find the word itself or some form of the word “amazement” appearing fifty-eight times in Luke’s Gospel. And it is most often spoken by those who were cast off or set aside or by those who were beaten or worn down. When they saw Jesus come in and do his work, then suddenly they saw new beginnings. And they were **amazed**.

Luke is the only one of the four Gospel writers to include many of our most beloved stories. He’s the only one who writes about the Prodigal Son, focusing our attention on the God who yearns to reconcile with us, even before we can figure out how to stammer out an apology. He’s also the only one who gives us that beautiful vignette of Mary and Martha. In that story he helps focus our attention on the more important things—the things that draw us closer to the feet of Jesus rather than to the distractions of the world. And as we get ready to approach the season of Advent, he is the only writer to include details in the story of the birth of Jesus. The very first to hear and bear witness to Jesus—the first ones to be given sight of this miracle of love wrapped in flesh—were they kings or wise men from afar? In Luke’s version, we discover that in fact they were lowly shepherds going about life’s daily toil.

Today’s passage sums up the whole year and points us to the core of who Jesus is and why he matters. You will notice that Luke is very careful about where our gaze and our attention linger. Or, maybe more to the point—he is very careful about where our gaze doesn’t land. We arrive at this horrible place of death and humiliation—where earthly powers are so fully on display, and yet Luke does not focus on painting a picture of hammers or nails. There is nothing about stretched out bodies or blood-splattered wood; no attention is given to the horrors of that moment inflicted by earthly powers. What he simply says is that Jesus was crucified there. For to focus on those earthly powers risks missing the meaning that is about to blossom in Jesus’ greatest glory, raised up high on the cross. No gorilla is going to stroll into the middle of this picture but rather the full measure of what love incarnate looks like. It’s so

obvious in this story and yet so easily missed if we're distracted by things like casting lots for clothes or mockery of the crowds or derision of the soldiers. No, Luke wants us to look directly at Jesus and to listen to him. On Christ the King Sunday, this parament pictures a mountain. Do you remember what happened with Jesus on that mountaintop? It was the transfiguration—a moment when Jesus was joined by the prophets and the law—by Moses and Elijah. And it was easy for the disciples to get distracted then and lose sight. Do you remember what God boomed out of the clouds to the disciples? 'This is my beloved son.' And then what came next? 'Listen to him.' And so on this day—on this Christ the King Sunday, as we see Christ on the cross, we are going to do what God instructs disciples of all ages to do, and that is to listen to him—even and especially there. For I think that the words that Jesus uttered are needed even more than at that moment on the cross: "Listen to Jesus." In the midst of being crucified, in the midst of the mightiest powers on earth doing their best—I mean their *worst*, the power that was on display was only for power's sake—all of it, though an illusion. Christ offered a glimpse of what is transformational power—what is true power and the kind of power that can break into dead ends and create new life. There—on the cross—Emmanuel—God with us. The words Jesus speaks in this Gospel are words of forgiveness. "Forgive them," Jesus says. Who is the 'them?' I think it refers to everyone. First, he's forgiving the person who put him on the cross. I think he's forgiving the religious leaders who created the circumstance; I think he's forgiving the soldiers who escorted him; I think he's forgiving those who were mocking him; I think he is even forgiving the crowd, who has shown up for this gruesome spectacle, and maybe because they've seen it over and over again have become worn down and no longer sense just how wrong it is, but the crowd does nothing to stop what is unfolding. Jesus simply says, "Forgive them. Forgive them all."

This text is not prim and proper, nor is it the normal kind of text we read when we wear the today's white emblem and dress up the church with these paraments. But then again, it's all too true that this world is not exactly prim and proper either. This text is not a Camelot on display for us to see, but then again, neither is this world. "The Kingdom has drawn near," Jesus says. It's so near we can feel it; we can touch it; we can taste it, but sometimes it feels so far away. But what Luke wants us to look at here is the gift of Jesus—one that cuts through with true power to offer new beginnings. And with the act of forgiveness.

I wonder what would happen in this day and time if on the local, national, and international level we practiced forgiveness. Most likely we would cut through it all and find new beginnings. And just in case you're thinking that this model of Jesus is just for display and for looking at, think about people of faith throughout history who have lived out this *way* of Jesus, remember—this way of Jesus in forgiveness. I want to remind you of Oscar Romero. He was one who had stood up to the powers of government and the military and to the powers of injustice in the world and was celebrating Communion in church at the very table, offering forgiveness when he was gunned down. He was shot by someone who found that kind of power—the power of forgiveness at this table too strong to tolerate. Or maybe fast forward to South Africa at the end of apartheid when it would have been so easy for retaliation or a recriminatory kind of justice to flow forth—instead, Desmond Tutu helped author a way of forgiveness, bathed in truth-telling and forgiveness where horrific pains were let go in order that new beginnings might happen. And, just in case you think these things only happen by

priests or holy people on international stages—know that it isn't so long ago that in the middle of a Dallas courtroom, as the judge pronounced a sentence of one kind, that the brother of the person who had mistakenly been killed in their own apartment by an off-duty police officer, that the brother got up and offered to hug the police officer in an act of forgiveness. What we see in the power of Jesus on this cross is purely the power of forgiveness—the power that cuts inside all other claimed powers in order that we might have a new beginning.

If you were listening, there was one other thing that Jesus said up on that cross. There was one other person convicted (whether rightly or wrongly) and placed up on that torture instrument next to Jesus. He asks Jesus for forgiveness; he yearns for that reconciliation, and do you remember what Jesus said to him? He said, “Today you will with me in paradise.” This is not the first time that that word has been used in the Bible. Do you know the other time that word has been used in the Bible? Think back. Way back. Think back even further—the Garden of Eden! The only other place in the Bible that word was used was to describe the Garden of Eden—the time when all was good, and when people were created for goodness and relationship. Jesus says, “Today you will be with me there.” Just like forgiveness, that paradise isn't there just for an end-of-life grand conclusion but rather that paradise is being offered to us here and now—when we live in the way of Jesus, freely pouring out our forgiveness and our life power for the sake of others. When we're able to do that, then we live in paradise not just when we cease breathing but while we yet breathe and continue living. On this Sunday, this passage is so important because it reminds us of the power of Jesus—minus all of the trappings and all the distractions that sometimes come with the story. Next week when you return to this room, it will be gorgeous. It will be just as you've always seen it. Advent decorations will be up all around the room. The deacons have taken good notes and they know exactly where everything goes. As we prepare for the Advent season and look at how Christ offers the world a new choice, let's not get caught up in the trappings either—no matter how beautiful or how wonderful. But instead, listen to Jesus. Instead look for that baby coming into the stable, that fragile baby—because we know where that baby will end, and at the same time we know the new beginning that will be found there too.

Amen.



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