



*“Coming into the Kingdom”*

The Rev. Mary A. Kelly

Sermons at Central Park United Methodist Church

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*Three crosses stood together side by side atop a hill.*

Crudely constructed state instruments of torture and death, they were visible symbols of government oppression looming high above the dusty terrain; a public reminder of what could happen to anyone who dared to anger the Roman occupiers. What transpired after Jesus and the two criminals were hung there is a shameful reminder of our basest human inclinations unchecked and unleashed: mockery, cruelty, derision, degradation. The power-filled scoffing at the powerless, ridiculing *the least of these* (Mt. 25:36) because of their weakness in the face of overwhelming dominion. On earth, the meek are most often easily subdued. The ugliness of that fact highlights our desperate need for divine justice.

One of the criminals cried aloud, “*Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing.*” (Lk. 23:34) That sounds offensive, doesn’t it? To brand our Lord Jesus as “criminal” strikes at the very heart of our beliefs, yet he *was* condemned to die as a lawbreaker, suffering alongside others convicted and sentenced by the same governing authorities. Let’s pause for just a moment, while we’re here, to consider the nature of Jesus’ human suffering, lest we skip over this very real fact of our Savior’s very real agony. We Protestants tend to move rather quickly in this regard, as our theology celebrates the triumph of the empty cross over and above the Roman Catholic image of the suffering servant permanently affixed there.

But Jesus *was* born of a woman; Jesus *was* as fully human as he is fully divine. The fact that he died an agonizing and painful death at the hands of men should not and must not be glossed over, lest we diminish the the impact of his ultimate victory; lest we let ourselves off the hook for the heinous nature of our own crimes against humanity. On earth, people persist in torturing and killing one another. The ugliness of that fact illustrates our desperate need for God’s redemptive grace.

*Thank God for the benevolent nature of our Lord; if not for grace, how could we go on?* For in the midst of his own pain and his own grief, Jesus issued a public plea for forgiveness. “*Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing.*” In this single act of generosity, we are both convicted and redeemed. Again and again we sin; again and again, we hear the echo of Jesus’ words across the expanse of human history: “*Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing.*”

“*And the people stood by, watching.*” (Lk. 23:35) The people watched an atrocity unfolding before them and did nothing to stop it. Why do we persist in turning a blind eye to human suffering? On earth, human suffering is still a very real and very present occurrence. Yet we who are many have somehow become convinced that we can’t do anything about it, when in fact we can. Mother Teresa is credited with having said, “If you can’t feed a hundred people, then feed just one.”

According to the Gospel of Matthew, the resurrected Christ appeared before his disciples and directed them to a mountaintop and said to them, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*” (Mt. 28:18-20) Therefore do not think yourself powerless in the face of human suffering, for we who follow Jesus have access to the power of God’s Holy Spirit to effect change. Let it never be said of you, that you stood by and watched as another human being suffered.

“*If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.*” But Jesus did not save himself; instead, he chose to save all of us. On earth, we see death as the final act; the end of the road; the final solution. But when the kingdom comes, death shall be no more, mourning and crying and pain shall be no more. God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, for God will make God’s home among us. (Rev. 21:3-4) The mortal death of Jesus ushered in a new reality: death has been swallowed up in victory.

“*In fact Christ has been raised from the dead,*” writes the Apostle Paul, “*the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.*” (I Cor. 15:20-22) Thus, the cross that stood high atop a hill became for us an enduring symbol of Christ’s victory over the grave. If we truly act *on earth* as agents of Christ who no longer fear death, imagine what we might make of ourselves in this world. We are not powerless; we are forgiven. We are redeemed. And we are justified by faith in the One who conquered death. Go forth therefore and live into Christ’s vision of the Kingdom of God, empowered by grace and transformed by love.



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