

The Rev. Jonathan W. Linman, Ph.D.
Bishop's Assistant for Formation, Metropolitan New York Synod, ELCA
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/2/2010, Good Friday
Luke 23:39-46

“Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!”

So railed -- brayed, reviled, insolently scolded -- one of the criminals.

Dwelling on and meditating with this text in preparation for today's observance, I was reminded of a moment in the 1994 movie, “Priest,” that dealt with the personal and vocational identity struggles of a young priest. The protagonist cleric in the story had just heard the confession of a girl who revealed to him the incestuous abuses of her father. In the scene that I recalled, the priest is kneeling before a crucifix agonizing over how to deal with this pastoral crisis, struggling with why God would allow such a thing to happen. Suddenly he calls out to the body on the cross: “Don't just hang there; do something!”

“Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” Perhaps this challenge from the criminal who shares a cross is Jesus' last temptation.

No doubt the criminal wanted deliverance from his immediate circumstances. “If you're as great as they say you are and indeed anointed by God, don't just hang there, do something. Get down off your cross and then get me off mine, too.”

Jesus does not answer, does not respond. Once again, as in the wilderness experience, he does not succumb to temptation.

The irony, of course, is that Jesus, we confess, was in the process of doing saving work -- saving the criminals -- or at least one of them it would seem -- and certainly, then also all of us and the whole world.

Except that he wasn't saving the criminal or us or the world on our terms, in the ways we wanted it.

Even in the extremity of complete vulnerability and powerlessness, Jesus maintained his absolute discipline as in his prayer in the Garden: “not my will, but yours, O God, be done.”

And so there he remained, suspended for three hours, just hanging there. Yes, there's one more brief conversational exchange with the more conciliatory criminal: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” The sun's

light failed; the curtain in the temple was ripped in two. And then the final cry: "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last.

Complete obedience and surrender to the confounding will of God, ignoring the mocking, insolent temptation of the first criminal: "Save yourself and us!"

If this was Jesus' last temptation, then it's also arguably ours in the church, ours in the world.

The bishop's office gets a fair amount of the kind of thing Jesus got from his neighbor on the cross. Congregations struggling with viability, near institutional death. Faith communities torn apart by conflict. Pastors who commit indiscretions with members of their congregations. Pastors who long to move to another congregation because of their dissatisfaction where they are. And on. Some of the queries amount to: "You're the bishop; you're on the bishop's staff. Save yourself and us!"

Likewise, pastors will get this kind of thing from troubled parishioners and folk in our neighborhoods, people tied up in knots of difficulty, crisis after crisis, suffering piled on top of suffering: "You're the pastor; save yourself and us!"

Rightly or wrongly, the church as a whole gets this from an angry, frustrated, anxious and oftentimes insolent, mocking world: "You're the church of Christ; do something; save us!"

Individually, you may be on the receiving end of helpless, frustrated, desperate pleas at home, at work, in the marketplace, at school -- people who call out to you, "save me."

The challenge in the church and in our lives is that we are not nearly or consistently as resolute and disciplined as Jesus was. Jesus met the railing plea of the criminal with steadfast silence and ultimately surrendering his spirit to his father. And in this, we trust -- though it defies logic -- saved the world on God's terms.

In my estimation and experience, we in the church more typically bend over backwards to meet the needs as stated and on the terms of those who call out to us, rushing in to help with our own devices and limited resources, our own understandings of what should be done.

And in this, we try with all of our might to do what we cannot ultimately do: save the world.

In a nutshell here is the crisis of faith currently in the church and in our lives: I am convicted and convinced that we do not trust the saving sufficiency of what Jesus was up to on the tree of the cross, the sufficiency by God's unimaginable grace in just hanging there, in surrendering his spirit to God, in breathing his last.

Yes, it defies logic. No, I don't understand it, how the saving works. But Jesus trusted the sufficiency of whatever was going on: "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!" And so I hear a beckoning call from the cross to likewise trust what God is up to on this day.

Our calling on this night and always is to resist the temptations, the seductions of those around us who would have us save them on their terms.

And then to do as Jesus did: individually and as a whole church, to be ready to give up the ghost, to breathe our last, to commit and entrust ourselves wholly and fully and finally to God.

"Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!" Having said this he breathed his last.

Breath left his body. But that breath, that wind, that spirit did not disappear from the face of the earth. Rather, it lingered in repose, in waiting, in vigil until it could re-animate Jesus' resurrected flesh.

And that so that he could pass along that same breath to his followers after the resurrection according to John's Gospel: "Peace be with you," Jesus said. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Jesus' breath animates the disciples to do the work of forgiveness that the criminal asked for on the cross, but on God's terms and in the power of God's Holy Spirit, not according to our own devices, logic and energies which ultimately fail to save.

And the breath of Jesus didn't stop there. More of it was to come from on high after his Ascension, when he returned to sit on the right hand of his Father. This further outpouring of God's breath, the rush of divine wind occurred on the Day of Pentecost when the Spirit came as tongues of fire and rested on the disciples giving them the power to be apostles, to preach and to teach and to do signs and wonders.

In the power of the Spirit, those whom Jesus sent into the world could further God's reconciling work, extending the absolution of Jesus' other cry from the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

And this not under their own power, but in the very power and with the authority of God, and on God's terms.

When we agonize at the foot of the cross over the pain and suffering of those who would have us save them, and we are tempted to cry out much as the priest did in the movie, "Don't just hang there; do something" -- be mindful that the breath that carries that very cry has its source in God, and it can carry the prayer of the Holy Spirit as an intercession for the world with sighs too deep for words.

It's in this breathing our last, when we can do nothing but commit ourselves wholly and totally to God -- "Father, into thy hands we commit our spirits" -- that we are in a position to address the world's deepest needs, because finally, then, we do it in the power of God's Holy Spirit, according to the logic of God's will, and not according to how we think it should be done.

So it is that we give as a church and in our lives a reconciling, forgiving, saving gift to the world. Not what it wants, perhaps, but what it needs.

And we become the prayer attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr and William Spence that so many in recovery commonly pray:

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as God did, this sinful world
as it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that God will make all things right
if I surrender to His Will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with God
Forever in the next.
Amen.