

A Tale of Two Thieves

Jeremiah 23:1-6 Colossians 1:11-20 Luke 23:33-43

Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church

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This morning I want to tell you the stories of two thieves and three kings. The two thieves are the ones introduced to us in the reading from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus is one of the kings. The other two come from the literature of James Michener and C.S. Lewis.

The story of the two thieves is also the tale of two theologies. When Martin Luther was clarifying the basis for the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, he distinguished between what he called the Theology of the Cross and the Theology of Glory. He warned of the temptation of the Theology of Glory – the desire to claim association with a glorious god in order to use that glory for personal gain. Rather, preached Luther, claim the Theology of the Cross, serving and suffering for the sake of Jesus, who suffered along side us. What Luther was talking about is succinctly pictured for us in scripture in the persons of the two thieves that hang on either side of the cross of Jesus.

We don't know if these two criminals had heard anything about Jesus before this day. But now, as the three of them hang on crosses, they are learning a lot. Jesus looks down from the cross and says, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Then they hear the leaders scoffing: "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"

The Roman soldiers are also mocking him: "If you are King of the Jews, save yourself!" And someone has placed an inscription his cross that reads, "This is the King of the Jews."

In the midst of their own pain and despair, these two thieves are wondering who it is that hangs between them. Is this a king? Is this the Messiah?

The first, hearing the comments of those mocking Jesus, begins to think that there may be something to their talk. Perhaps this is a last minute opportunity for escape. Might not the Messiah call down an army of angels? Perhaps this Messiah has a large following, and just over the hill, any minute now, there may appear an army of rebels, first coming to their rescue, and then storming Jerusalem to overthrow Pilate's evil rule. "Are you not the Messiah? Then save yourself and us!"

The first thief is a proponent of what Martin Luther described as the Theology of Glory. Any real king, he surmises, will not endure this cross. Moreover, this first thief is not willing to give his allegiance to any king that will leave him on his own cross! "Jesus show me that you are a real king. Save yourself and take away my cross, too!"

The second criminal rebukes the first, articulating the Theology of the Cross in just three sentences. "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" (He calls for respect for God without regard to his own personal circumstances.)

"And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds..." (He looks at himself honestly.)

(He also looks at Jesus honestly and sees him clearly. He sees Jesus on a cross, recognizes him as a king, and asks to be part of the kingdom.) ... "but this man has done nothing wrong." ... "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." (Luke 23:40-42)

The second criminal does not ask for rescue or vindication; he asks for a relationship with Jesus regardless of where that relationship will lead.¹

In James Michener's novel *Centennial*, Lame Beaver lives out the theology of the cross. Lame Beaver is an Arapaho warrior who becomes legendary among his own people during his own life-time. As a young brave he had been responsible for bringing the first horses to the Arapaho people. He was held in esteem by his people, but he was not a chief. Though the people looked to him for wisdom, and celebrated his acts of courage in their stories, he would not be chief. It was not that the people would not choose him, but rather, as Michener says, Lame Beaver discovered that allowing oneself to be called chief "was an act of pomp engaged in by lesser men who enjoyed bedecking themselves in feathers. He would let others use office to proclaim their feats. He would concentrate on the feat itself, doing what had to be done... in silence."

Lame Beaver was a seasoned warrior in his 50's when he performed his final act of bravery. The rival Pawnee tribe had kidnapped a young girl to use as a human sacrifice in a tribal ceremony. Lame Beaver, after careful thought, announced that he would stake himself out in the effort to rescue the girl. His fellow warriors knew the seriousness of his words. It was the stuff of story and legend. To stake oneself out meant that in preparation for battle one would drive a stake into the ground, tie himself to it, and stand firm to take on all attackers. When the rescue party devised the plan outside the Pawnee village, Lame Beaver explained his part. "I will stake myself out... there. I will not fight any warrior who comes at me. I will wait for the great chief Rude Water, and I will shoot him dead. The Pawnee will panic, and we shall have the girl."

Lame Beaver did what he said: staked himself out, received wounds without responding, took one deadly shot and killed the Pawnee chief.

It was as he said. The Pawnee panicked. But as the mounted enemy warriors retreated they rode over Lame Beaver, still tied to his stake, he was stabbed two more times, and he was dead.

Lame Beaver was not a chief, but he was given a given a chieftain's burial. His words and actions were more influential than those who had the title.

We have a history and a folklore that is full of chiefs of a different kind, usually known as Kings and Queens. Thus when we think of royalty there are a host of images that come to mind. We think of wealthy families whose personal lives are displayed in supermarket tabloids, or perhaps we think of castles and fairy tales. Royalty goes along with images of power, wealth and glory.

But there are other images of royalty in life and in literature. One of the episodes in C.S. Lewis' Narnia series is called *The Horse and His Boy*. It tells the story of Cor, who as an infant was kidnapped and taken to a foreign land to grow up as a servant in poverty. Fate takes him on a perilous journey back to his homeland, where he finally discovers that he is the eldest prince, the heir to the throne. Much to his surprise, he discovers that his younger brother is overjoyed by his return: "Hurrah! hurrah!" the younger brother shouts, "I shan't have to be king... I'll always be a prince. It's Princes have all the fun!"

Then his father, King Lune, explains, "That's truer than thy brother knows. For this is what it means to be king: to be first in every desperate attack and last in every desperate retreat, and when there's hunger in the land to ... laugh louder over a scantier meal than any person in your land."

If we go back far enough, before the pomp and circumstance popular culture paints of royalty, we find a truer image of sacrificial leadership. The scriptures point us to this ancient and paradoxical view of royalty – leadership that is authenticated by the example of sacrifice for the sake of the people. This is the essence of our royal roots: King Jesus.

Somehow that second thief was gifted with such sight that he could look at Jesus sharing his pain and recognize the true image of royalty. "Jesus remember me when you come into your Kingdom." Here was the monarch leading the way to the Realm of God.

What the criminal saw that day most others missed. The disciples didn't see it. Even earlier that week, when the people called Jesus King as he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, the disciples weren't sure what was going on. John's Gospel says: "His disciples did not understand this at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that this had been written of him and had been done to him." Jesus just did not look or act like a king. Donkeys and crosses were not the usual royal trimmings. "If we had only known," the disciples must have said to themselves. But later they did know. And they told us. And now we know.

Jesus was mocked when he hung on the cross. "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" "Why doesn't he save himself, if he is the Messiah, the chosen."

But it is precisely because Jesus was the true Messiah that he could not climb down from the cross. He was not there to save himself, but to save the world. Jesus was a royal figure not despite of the cross, but precisely because of the cross! Jesus was a leader worthy of being called King because he loved his people, he lived on behalf of the people, and he finally staked himself out for the people, to rescue us all from a lifetime of sacrificial rites. We are not called to pay constant tribute to some divine monarch on a far off throne, who might give us some small reward if we appease well enough. We are inspired to live faithful lives because the sovereign one has hung next to us on the cross, and become the first born from the dead. We are called to share in Christ's glory, which means not only rejoicing in God's love, but also following Jesus' path to glory, to learn from Jesus the way of sacrificial love.

We have not been put on this earth to seek for ourselves the praise and accolades that go to the most pompous kings and queens. As Michener's *Lame Beaver* recognized, the purpose of life is not to bedeck oneself in feathers. It is to do what has to be done, often in silence. It is to be inspired to service by Jesus Christ, who demonstrated true royalty by being the servant of all. Let us follow Jesus. Amen.

ⁱ The Rev. Dr. William J. Sappenfield is the pastor of Peace Lutheran Church in Austin, Texas.