**Rev. Melissa J. Claxton  
Luke 23  
April 2, 2023**

Today, we conclude our series on Jesus and the Outsiders, Outcasts, and Outlaws. Over the past five weeks, we have looked at how Jesus lifted up the lowly and restored the marginalized into community. He sought out those on the outside and he welcomed them back in. When a sinful woman came and washed his feet, his host was appalled. How could he let her touch him? If he only knew...but Jesus did know. He knew what was going on in her life. He knew the pain she was holding inside. He met her in that space, connected with her, brought healing to her as he said, “I didn’t come for those who got it all together...I came for those who need help.”

The Gospel of Luke shows us a Jesus who saw people in all of their humanity and gently and lovingly brought them back into community...even if they were hiding in a tree not wanting to be seen like Zacchaeus was. Salvation is coming to your house today, he said. New life...eternal life...abundant life...comes to your house today. That’s what Jesus offers.

Today is Palm Sunday. We talked about that last week...about how Jesus rode down the hill from the Mount of Olives on a donkey. And as he rode down that hill, he could see the temple. He could see all of Jerusalem as it lay before him. And Luke told us that Jesus wept. Riding down that hill into Jerusalem, Jesus cried. People were yelling and shouting praises as they waved their palm branches and laid them down on the ground before him, and Jesus cried. He cried for the city. He cried for the people.

Do you know what these palm branches represented? They were a sign of victory and triumph. Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem. These people still saw Jesus as the one who was going to deliver them from Roman occupation. They believed that was why he was coming...but that wasn’t why Jesus came. He came so we could have eternal life and have it abundantly.

Today, we continue to look at how Jesus lifted up the outsiders, outcast, and outlaws to the very end. Let us pray.

**Sermon:** Not too long ago, I had an extended family member who was very angry about something that happened. I’m not going to go into the details of it, but basically, they had done something that knew they really weren’t supposed to do, and someone, who was concerned about what they had done, shared that information with their boss. There were consequences. I believe they lost their job over it. I’m not totally sure. Sometimes, our actions, whether we think they were right or wrong have consequences, and their actions had consequences.

When those consequences hit, they went to social media to vent...which was how they got caught in the first place. And what they wrote was, “There’s a special place in hell for the person who did this.” A special place in hell for a person who, out of concern, passed on this information.

**A special place in hell!** Whatever we think about that whole situation and who was right or who was wrong...Is that really the God we serve? Think about that for a moment. Is that really how God is, because I’ve heard that phrase said on more than this one occasion. Apparently, that saying was made famous by Madeleine Albright who said on numerous occasions “*There is a special place in hell for women who don’t help other women.”* But,I’ve heard it thrown out there for everything from murder and mass carnage to that person who cut you off in traffic today. Apparently, there’s a special place in hell for people who are in a hurry or didn’t turn on their blinker. And I think that sometimes in our anger and frustration, part of us want to believe that, but ***Is that really the God we serve? Is that really the God we see in Christ?***

One thing we as Christians believe about Jesus is that he was the embodiment of God’s spirit...the Son of God, the Messiah, the Incarnate Word of God. John began his gospel by saying, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”* Jesus was the Word. We, as Christians, believe that. That means that in the Christ, we see the Spirit of God at work in the world. And I’m going to tell you, I’ve read those gospels and there isn’t a single place where Jesus tells us that there is a special place in hell for those we don’t like, those who cut us off on the highway, or even those who have done us great harm in the world. **That’s the hard one right there, because we want a special place in hell for them...don’t we? Part of us at least.**

This week, our world was rocked with yet another school shooting. Three children and three adults were killed, countless others traumatized. There was an article in the Washington Post that talked about the extent of this devastation and that since Columbine in 1999, 348,000 children have experienced a mass shooting in their school first hand. And I think that part of us want a special place in hell for the people who caused that damage, but maybe that’s the problem. Maybe they’re already in hell. **And wasn’t the Christ we see in the Gospels, particularly Luke’s Gospel, working to pull people out of the hell they were already in?**

In today’s gospel lesson, we find Jesus on the cross. Last week, we talked about his entry into Jerusalem...Palm Sunday that we celebrate today...and how he was surrounded in fanfare as people cut palm branches and waved them and laid them down in his path as a sign of victory and triumph. They were excited that he was there. Like Zacchaeus, they had gathered in hopes of getting a glimpse of him, because he was the One they were waiting for. He was the one who was promised. He was the one who was going to deliver them. And he was...just not the way they wanted him to.

It didn’t take long for things to take a turn. It started when Jesus went into the Temple and overturned the tables. For the Jewish leaders, it was that final straw. They had to get rid of this guy. Jesus knew it was coming. He knew where this was leading. Thursday was the Passover celebration, and he gathered with his disciples to share in the Passover meal. At this meal, he already knew that Judas had betrayed him. He knew the soldiers were coming.

After the meal, we read in Luke 22:39-44:

*39 Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. 40 On reaching the place, he said to them, “Pray that you will not fall into temptation.” 41 He withdrew about a stone’s throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, 42 “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” 43 An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. 44 And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.*

You know, I always took that figuratively...that he was praying so hard that sweat was rolling down his face and his sweat was like blood. But I learned something this week. Sweating blood is actually a documented medical condition. It’s called hematohidrosis, a rare condition in which an individual under extreme levels of stress physically sweats blood. Leonardo Da Vinci actually wrote about a soldier who sweated blood before battle. Jesus was under so much stress that he was sweating blood.

From there he was arrested, taken in front of the Chief Priest...then over to Pontius Pilate because they wanted him put to death and the only one who could do that was Pilate. Pilate had him beaten in hopes of appeasing the religious leaders, but that didn’t work. Pilate tried to negotiate, offering to let one prisoner go...either Jesus Barabbas, a criminal who had killed at least one person in hopes that they would pick Jesus of Nazareth. They picked Barabbas and it wasn’t that hard to get the crowd to go along. Mob mentality at work.

Finally, Jesus was put up on the cross in between two criminals...two outlaws. They were bandits. When Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan, he used the word bandit to describe the men who robbed and severely beat the man and left him for dead. These are the kind of men who were hanging next to him...one on each side...men who would go and cause physical harm to another, even to the point of killing them in an effort to rob them.

When we gather on Friday, we’re going to go look at what Jesus said from the cross and what that means for us. We’re going to look at all seven phrases. Today, we’re going to look at what he said here Luke’s gospel. The first thing was, *“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”*

**Father, forgive them...**Who’s the them? We want that special place in hell for people, but here, from the cross Jesus is saying, *“Father, forgive them...they know not what they do.”*

Forgive Pontius Pilate for giving the final word. Forgive him for not having the courage to stand up to the religious leaders. He knew Jesus was innocent of the charges. He gave in out of fear...forgive him. ***How often do we succumb to fear in our lives? How often do we fail to stand up for what is right? And Jesus is saying Forgive them!***

Father, forgive the Chief Priest and the Pharisees for they know not what they are doing? They think their right. They truly believe that getting rid of me will make everything alright. They’re so focused on the law that they can’t see the people or the purpose of the law. **Do you ever get tunnel vision? Do you ever get so focused on what you think is the right thing to do that you can’t see God at work right in front of you?** Father, forgive them.

Our how about Father, forgive everyone who stood in the courtyard that day and got caught up in the mob mentality, yelling “Crucify him! Crucify him!” These are good people. Many of these are kind people, caring and compassionate. Yet, they got caught up in the excitement of the moment and forgot who they were. ***Have you ever got caught up in the moment and allowed it to carry you away?*** Father, forgive them.

Then, there were the two men hanging on the cross beside him. One full of anger as he threw insults at him. The other full of regret as he asks to not be forgotten. Both having made some pretty bad, harmful decisions in life. Both full of brokenness and pain. ***Maybe you didn’t become a bandit, but maybe you have allowed you own pain and anger get out of control and cause harm to others.*** Father, forgive them, they know not what they are doing.

**We find ourself in this story as Jesus says, *´Father, forgive them.”*** Love and compassion. That’s what hung on the cross that day. Grace...God’s unmerited and undeserved love for us... all of us. As Jesus hung on the cross, his words were for all ages and all people. ***“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they’re doing.”*** No special place in hell...only forgiveness.

**One of those outlaws hanging on the cross beside him, turned and asked to be remembered.** Jesus said to him, “*Today, you will be with me in paradise.”* Today! Jesus knew what he had done. Jesus knew that he had caused great harm to another. Jesus knew that he was a thief and maybe even a murder, and by worldly standards, he deserved to be there. It was the consequence of his actions. And Jesus still said, *“There’s a special place in hell for you.”* **No...Jesus didn’t say that. He said, *“Today, you will be with me in paradise.”***

As Jesus was hanging on that cross, he offered salvation to the world. One thief was willing to reach out and grab it. The other couldn’t bring himself to it. But I told you why I love Luke’s gospel. Luke reminds us that God is persistent and God doesn’t give up. In our finite understanding of the world, we have come to the conclusion that once we die, that’s it. Opportunity over. But the Apostle Paul told us differently. In his letter to the Romans, he wrote that nothing separates us from God’s love for us in Jesus.

In Romans 8, he wrote:

*38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

God never gives up, and God’s love is so powerful that it can heal even the most broken spirit. God will continue for all of eternity to reach out to and bring that spirit back. That’s what Luke tells us. It tells us that God’s love is so powerful that it can heal and restore the most broken of people...those the world has cast aside into their own special hell...those who have done great harm to others because they are in their own special hell.

I was thinking about the young person who went into that school in Tennessee this week along with the 376 other school shootings since 1999. I was thinking about the people behind them and all of the other mass shootings in churches and bars, in malls and movie theaters. Once upon a time, I wished for a special place in hell for them. Then, I realized that they were already in hell. They were broken people filled with pain and hatred because healthy, happy people don’t cause that kind of pain and destruction. And when I realized that, I began to hear the compassion in Christ’s words... *“Father, forgive them. They know not what they do.”*

It doesn’t make it right, and it has to stop. It doesn’t bring those killed back or undo the trauma caused to countless others. But if God’s love is that powerful, imagine what it can do in your life. And if we’re willing to share the love of Christ with those in the world around us, imagine what we can do in the life of someone else...someone who’s already living in a special kind of hell.

**All the way to the cross...**Jesus loved and restored all the way to the cross, including the outlaw. He reached out with compassion and grace even from the cross. That’s for us! And as disciples of Jesus, that’s for us to share with the world. I remind you that Love is the only thing powerful enough to change the world.

Today is Communion Sunday. We’re going to go to God in prayer...remembering who God is, who Christ is, and who we’re called to be. Then, we’re going to share in the elements of Communion. For those of you at home, use whatever you have available to you right now. In the United Methodist tradition, Communion is our alter call. When we come to this table that Jesus prepared for us...Jesus invited us to...we bring our whole selves. We offer ourselves back to Christ as a living sacrifice ready to be used in the world. Please join me in the Communion prayer.