

Three Crosses - Not One

Luke 23:35-43

When you are a young person, small details can take on larger meanings and astonish you.

One of the most significant places in my life is a beautiful hillside place for vespers at Camp Lake Stephens, just outside of Oxford, Mississippi. Most mornings and evenings we would have worship on that hillside during youth camps. Rows of split logs were laid as rough seats that allowed us to look and see the lake below us and the farms and valleys that stretched out beyond. It was at that spot when I was 16 that I had a transformative faith experience of feeling deeply loved by God, and feeling that my heart had swelled to double its size, able to love the whole world. A few years later it was in that same spot where I would sit alone and determine that I was being led to study theology and enter into the ministry.

The small details with the larger meaning were three trees which stood out in front of us, slightly down the hill, as a backdrop for the preacher. They stood there as crosses making our outdoor place of worship seem like a real sanctuary. For us young people, the setting overlooking the lake and the valley, with three perfectly centered trees, stuck us as something of a miracle.

- The tree in the center was the tallest of the three. It went from the earth into the heavens, straight up to the sky.
- On the right side of the Christ tree was a tree that started out crooked and about halfway up was straight as an arrow.
- On the other side of the Christ tree, there was a tree that was very bent out of shape. It was crooked from the base and twisted all the way up to its top.

There is an obscure Christian camp in the state of Mississippi, God had given us the miracle of the three trees reminding us of Luke's story of Jesus and the two criminals crucified beside him, one started out crooked but repented and the other one who was crooked all the way to up its trunk.

This past summer, I went back to the camp with my brother to take my grandniece to summer camp. I ran up the hill, and to my surprise, the log seating had been replaced with fancier rows of comfortable bench seats. When I looked out on that beautiful view of the valley something was missing. Two of the trees had fallen down. Only the Christ tree remained. I found out later that a storm had taken them.

It's great, of course, that the Christ tree still stands. But I wonder if kids these days even recognize the center tree as the Christ tree without the two trees on either side. Without the trees of the thieves, much of the story is lost. Without the other two crosses, you might not even recognize that the center tree is the Cross of Christ. It requires more than a crucified Savior and Lord. It requires the story of people needing His salvation.

According to all four gospels, Jesus did not face His death alone. He was hung on a cross to die with two other criminals. This fulfilled the Old Testament prophecy that He would be reckoned as a common criminal, surrounded by sinners, even in death. But only Luke has a conversation between the three.

Given the excruciating pain of crucifixion, the challenges of breathing, one wonders that there is any conversation at all. Even more remarkable is that one of the criminals seems to have thought of himself as not being as bad as Jesus. In Luke's version, he dares to be the third one to deride Jesus: "Some Messiah you are! If You were really the Messiah, You'd be getting us out of this place! Why don't You save us and save Yourself!"

The other criminal heard what he said for he said back to him, "Do you not fear God?" We are getting what we deserve for what we did. This man has done nothing wrong. He is innocent."

According to a non-biblical, unaccepted early Christian writing, Dismus is the one who defends Jesus, and the thief ready to spit on Jesus is called Gestus. Barbara Brown Taylor points out that we often become more our true selves when we are nearing death. Angry, bitter people take off their nice mask and act like raging hornets, while people who are good at their core, reveal themselves to be better than people might have previously thought possible.

Gestus strikes me as being an unhappy, bitter sort of guy from the get-go. Maybe very early on in his life, he had gotten the message that life has little to offer him in a way of love and goodness, and he decided that if he was going to have anything, he'd have to take it for himself, even if it made making other people miserable and poorer for it. In his world, it is about the survival of the fittest - every man and woman for him or herself. So when he is convicted, he reveals the bitterness that he has feasted upon all his life. It is not his fault - it is someone else's fault. Life has never dealt him a decent hand. His conviction is simple proof that he was born under a bad sign. He is, in other words, a victim. He does not see that the victim mentality has anything to do with the creation of his life.

Maybe it was his parent's fault, his friend's fault, some woman's fault, the judge's fault, and why not God's fault? Blame it on someone else. He is, for us, an example of what happens when we fail to take responsibility for our lives and our failures. He is a caricature of what we can become when we lose hope, and fail to believe that something different is possible in our lives if we can see the error of our ways and repent, turn a back towards God.

Dismus is the crooked tree that goes straight. He may have messed up his life to the point of facing a horrific end, but he is not like Gestus. He knows and is willing to acknowledge something that Gestus, for whatever reason, does not: he knows he had a part in creating the train wreck that is his life. "You and I deserve what we are now receiving for what we have done." Perhaps, all along he had doubts about the harm he was doing and the way he was wasting his one shot at life. Now in his last hour, he's

ready to be honest with himself. Dismus accept responsibility for his life. He turns a new direction even when nailed to a cross. He dares in a place of despair to hold out that, even at this last hour, there is hope for him.

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He somehow knows that this man next to him - is, in reality, the Messiah - one whose life will not end with his death but will lead to new life. He asks that he may hitch his caboose to Jesus’s engine.

And Jesus says to him, “Truly I tell you, you will be with Me this very day in paradise.”

I miss those two tree crosses that left only the one in the middle. We need the story of the two crosses on the side of the man in the middle. Because it is one of those two crosses that we find ourselves. We are either the one who lives life as something that is to be survived and blamed on someone else for how bad it has been. Or we are the one who has come to understand the mistakes made, the opportunities missed, and yet who dares to hold out hope that there is one who will forgive and love.

Jesus said to all of us, “Father, forgiven them, for they know not what they do.” What more do we need to know? Amen.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, Home by Another Way, “The Man in the Middle,” a sermon. I am indebted to Rev. Taylor for the idea and flow of this sermon.