***The Prayer of the Good Thief***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno,* April 13, 2025

*based on Luke 23: 32-43*

Among my favorite words about prayer are these from the Nobel prize winning writer, Isaac B. Singer. He is remembered to have said, “I only pray when I am in trouble. But I am in trouble all the time.”

If I were ever asked for my favorite prayer it would be the prayer of the good thief in today’s gospel story; the one who says, “Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.”

There is just something so pure about it, something so honest, and simple; something so basic and so very very vulnerable.

Well, what else do we want so much in life as to not be forgotten? In parts of China it is said that the dead linger here on earth until that last person who remembers them is gone.

Listen to this poem by Stanley Koonitz – it strikes the same cord as that sweet vulnerable prayer of the thief. It’s called,

***Haley’s Comet***

Miss Murphy in first grade

wrote “Haley’s comet” in chalk

across the board and told us

it was roaring down the storm-tracks

of the Milky Way at frightful speed

and if it wandered off its course

and smashed into the earth

there'd be no school tomorrow.

A red-bearded preacher from the hills

with a wild look in his eyes

stood in the public square

at the playground's edge

proclaiming he was sent by God

to save every one of us,

even the little children.

"Repent, ye sinners!" he shouted,

waving his hand-lettered sign.

At supper I felt sad to think

that it was probably

the last meal I'd share

with my mother and my sisters;

but I felt excited too

and scarcely touched my plate.

So mother scolded me

and sent me early to my room.

The whole family's asleep

except for me.  They never heard me steal

into the stairwell hall and climb

the ladder to the fresh night air.

Look for me, Father, on the roof

of the red brick building

at the foot of Green Street--

that's where we live, you know, on the top floor.

I'm the boy in the white flannel gown

sprawled on this coarse gravel bed

searching the starry sky,

waiting for the world to end.

*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*

Anne Lamott, says that the two best prayers she knows are, ” Help me, Help me, Help me,” and “Thank you, Thank you, Thank you.”

Pretty basic, and the dramatic incident from the Bible we are focusing on this morning suggests that Anne Lamott has it about right.

Each of the four Gospel accounts report that Jesus of Nazareth did not die alone.

On the day of his public execution there were two others (genuine criminals) crucified with him; one on either side. We don’t know anything about them really; not their names or their crimes. Whoever they were, and whatever they did, the Roman civil authorities had decided that they too deserved to die on that Friday afternoon, just outside Jerusalem.

Luke adds an intriguing anecdote. Public executions historically have been well attended by the morbid or merely curious and also by those who enjoyed jeering and taunting the helpless suffering victim. Well, Jesus was the target of verbal abuse by someone who was crucified with him. Go figure.

One of the criminals, tradition reports, joined in with angry sarcasm: “You’re the Messiah—save yourself and us,” he says. So sad and ironic.

The man hung there next to the purest model of love the world has ever known and he uses his last moments on earth to hurl insults at the man hanging beside him.

But the other criminal, Luke says, rebuked his partner: “We are getting what we deserve, but this man, this man has done nothing wrong.”

This criminal’s words convey the irony of the whole picture. The “good people,” that is, the religious leaders of the day, are crucifying the anointed messenger of God, according to Luke.

The criminal, an ultimate outcast and outsider, sizes up the truth of the situation and speaks it. And then there follows a version of Anne Lamott’s prayer:

“Help me, help me, help me“ --- “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

And then Jesus pronounces the sweetest promise ever pronounced. “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Troutdale, you probably know, is the site of the old Multnomah County Poor Farm. It’s now the McMenamins resort hotel called, Edgefield.

The poor farm is a relic of a very old form of public welfare. There the county permitted the poor to garden; gave them free use of water from a hand-pump and lent them buckets to carry it to the uneven furrows that drank it away. It was a kind of a “workfare” back in 1900.

At night, each family slept on the floor of a one-room box of a house that the county put up and permitted them the use of.

Yes, and somewhere under a patch of grass next to the line of houses, lie those who died there. They lie in unmarked graves.

And here is the kicker: each body was buried with a mason jar in which each person's name was written on a piece of paper. The county provided the paper and the jars. Just think of that for a moment.

That was what the county called a respectable burial. That is what the county called, remembering the dead.

Some time ago, I was listening to NPR and heard an interview with a psychologist from India who had completed a study of cultures around the world. He was talking about what he identified as THE basic human desires which transcend all the world’s differing cultures.

The man concluded by saying that the deepest human desire was the desire “to remember and to be remembered.” The interviewer seemed surprised by this and asked if that desire was on par with human desires for food or intimacy.

The psychologist got my attention when he paused and responded, “Not really; the other desires are more primal. The desire to remember and to be remembered is more like a kind of prayer.”

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

The book of Exodus in the Old Testament begins with the following observation: “A pharaoh rose up in Egypt who did not know Joseph.”

The story goes like this -- Joseph, a great grandson of Abraham and Sarah, had been a valued first minister of Pharaoh. But a generation or three later he was totally forgotten, and the Hebrew people who had enjoyed some honor in Egypt during his life-time, were left destitute. In fact, they wee made slaves of pharaoh.

But as soon as Exodus chapter two, we learn that God hears the groanings of these forgotten people. God remembers the people when it looks like they will all just disappear from the earth without even a mason jar and their name on a slip of paper.

Not long before I moved here to pastor this church I delivered a Eulogy for a man named, Robert Heaney who lived the last few years of his life with his family in Oklahoma.

I concluded my words by quoting those of his 3 year old great-grandson, Miles, who during his bath, on the day of the passing of his great-grandfather, said, “Mommy, did you know we never stop loving grandpa even though he’s not with us anymore?”

“Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.”

Children just get this stuff. They know instinctively how important it is that we remember. They can’t imagine a world without the people they love the most.

My last church in Salt Lake City owned and ran a Preschool. Once a month I led a short chapel experience for the nearly two hundred children enrolled there. Each time we met I would tell them one story from the Bible. I told them eighteen familiar stories over a two-year cycle; stories like Noah’s ark, the nativity of Jesus, David and Goliath; you know, the familiar stories that every educated person in the western world ought to know.

Every other September I began the school year by explaining that God made everything, the trees, the sun, the stars . . . everything and at lesson’s end we would sing, “He’s got the whole world in his hands” -- which amounts to being a simple and profound affirmation of the sacredness of life.

One day I heard that one of the kids had been driven home after one of those September chapel days and he had asked his father a rather pointed question. “What about the bad people, Daddy? Does God have the bad people in his hands?”

And his father said, “Yes. God has everyone in his hands, even the bad people.” And the child thought about that for a while and asked “Why?”

—at which point his father changed the subject and returned to the original topic, which I recall, was juice and why there wasn’t any in the car.

“What about the bad people?” This is a perennial question in Christianity. What about the criminals, liars, and cheats? What about the villains of history? What about all the people who simply wander away? What about nonbelievers, people who know about the Christian religion and prefer their own or none? Do they get in, too?

And, look, now --- doesn’t it matter how you live—can you can live a life of crime and with your last breath say, “Jesus, remember me,” and have that be enough; you get in?

Some want us to say definitively, “Hey, you only get in if your theology is orthodox,” or if you repeat some acceptable formula. Like, “Jesus is my savior.”

Well, Jesus’ answer to them all is now (and always has been) the word -- grace. Pure grace.

Presbyterian theologian, Cynthia Rigby, has said, “It is impossible to fathom how a God who cares enough to number every hair on our heads could not, in the end, find a way to save every one of us.”

Christianity dares to teach that God’s love is unconditional. Yes, and Jesus’ promise, “Today you will be with me in Paradise,” is a shocking reminder of the wideness of God’s mercy.

Jesus’ essential teaching was that God comes to us in many ways—God seeks us like a woman searching for a lost coin, like a shepherd looking for a lost sheep.

The foundational story in the teaching of Jesus describes a God who waits patiently for our return and then runs down the road to welcome us home.

Christianity is about a man dying on a cross who, when a criminal says, “Remember me,” responds, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Christianity is about a Creator who made us all for a reason and who wants to include you, find you, love you and preserve your essence; a Creator who will never stop looking for you, no matter where you are, or what you have done, or how far you have strayed, or how lost you feel.

This life we live -- it just might, at bottom, be about remembering and being remembered.

Frederick Buechner once put the whole thing this way – I will close with his words:

*When you remember me, it means that you have carried something of who I am with you, that I have left some mark of who I am on who you are. It means that you can summon me back to your mind even though countless years and miles may stand between us. It means that if we meet again, you will know me.*

*It means that even after I die, you can still see my face and hear my voice and speak to me in your heart.*

*For as long as you remember me, I am never entirely lost. When I'm feeling most ghostlike, it's your remembering me that helps remind me that I actually exist. When I'm feeling sad, it's my consolation.*

*When I'm feeling happy, it's part of why I feel that way.*

*If you forget me, one of the ways I remember who I am will be gone. If you forget me, part of who I am will be gone.*

*"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" -- the good thief said [this] from his cross. There are perhaps no more human words in all of Scripture, no prayer we can pray so well.*

Amen