

Good Friday Reflections
Old First Reformed United Church of Christ
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"This Day thou shalt be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43)



It seems strange to me to talk about Paradise on a day that has always felt like one of the sadder days of our tradition. We are still days away from the clarity and joy of Resurrection. So it felt like a good challenge to think about this passage.

I tend to focus on Good Friday as the day of Jesus' martyrdom, when his defiance of the Roman Empire comes to a head. Not at all unusual for ME to be focusing on the political side of things. Forgiveness, sure. but Resistance! Now that I get excited about. And as for Paradise - today hardly seems like the day when the first shall be last or justice will roll down like water. This is the day the bad guys won - for now, at least.

But here we are, with crowds of women wailing, Roman guards mocking, and there is Jesus, in company on the cross with two other "criminals." Fitting, it seems, for the man who lived his life and ministry in the company of prostitutes, tax collectors, and other sinners.

These two criminals have two very different reactions to Jesus' presence there.

The first joins the chorus of Roman guards and others, mocking Jesus' power by asking him to "save himself and us."

I can't really blame the guy, I mean if I were about to be put to death I would ask just about anybody who might be able to save me. Or perhaps, beyond any chance of salvation in this life, it would be hard not to be cynical. How many of us, in much less dire straits, have begged to be relieved of our responsibility, to be saved from our own reality. Or worse, we sink to disbelief, mocking the courage of the brave, becoming cynical of the righteous. "Good luck with that," we say from the sidelines.

But the second criminal is different. He rebukes the first, saying "we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing

wrong." And asks, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

And to the second man Jesus promises not only to remember, but to BE WITH him. And not in some murky future, or three days from now, but TODAY.

This second man did not have to see the miracle of Christ's resurrection to take the leap of faith to admit to his own sin and shortcomings. And in his faith he finds the company of Christ, in paradise today.

To those who are willing to ask humbly, who remember faith in the most difficult circumstances, Christ responds,

"This day thou shalt be with me in Paradise."