



ST BART'S

A MEDITATION by:

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“Today You Will Be with Me in Paradise”

A meditation preached on March 29, 2013

Good Friday: The Three Hour Service from 12 noon to 3 o'clock

Based on Luke 23: 39-44a

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” Such was the promise made by one dying man to another in the last moments of their lives. A promise made by an innocent man to a guilty one, by a man who lived his life for the benefit of others, to a man who lived his life at the expense of others.

The man to whom Jesus said these words is often called the “repentant thief.” But maybe a more appropriate name would be the responsible thief. Or maybe the vulnerable thief, because taking responsibility for our lives makes us vulnerable—to the judgments of others, to a kind of chastening humility that exposes our weakness, and yet takes courage and strength. It’s not easy. Let me explain with a rather silly example.

Recently, I was watching one of my favorite cooking competition shows on television. The competing chefs had 30 minutes to make a dish from ingredients they hadn’t seen until that moment. When the 30 minutes were over, one chef had run out of time, and left one of the required ingredients off the plate. When questioned by the judges, the chef said, “The kiwi didn’t make it to the plate.” Now I’ve heard this from chefs on this show for years, but this time I *really heard* it—“the kiwi didn’t make it to the plate.” As if the kiwi were responsible for getting itself on the dish. It’s a pretty light example, I know, but it points to something serious about the human condition—our propensity for making excuses, for passing the buck, for taking responsibility only in a passive voice (“mistakes were made”), or for seeing ourselves as victims (the devil made me do it). The first thief symbolizes this propensity. He wants someone else to rescue him from the consequences of his choices. The second thief shows us the other option, the harder option. This vulnerable thief admitted his guilt and accepted the consequences. He resisted the temptation to avoid the truth of his life.

I certainly know this temptation in my own life, and as both a therapist and a teacher, I see it in people every day. Through my psychological lens, I see the propensity to avoid responsibility as a way to protect ourselves from judgment, from the condemnation of others, and from shame in ourselves. I think this attitude rests on a fundamental insecurity about our ability to survive being seen and known for the flawed human beings we are. But here’s the thing: avoiding responsibility for our actions doesn’t relieve us of guilt or shame. Instead, it leaves us weakened, and ultimately constrained in a kind of psychological and spiritual hell that is shaped by fear and insecurity, and in which we stay isolated from real love and real relationship.

Taking responsibility is the opposite of blaming, even blaming ourselves. It is avoiding the temptation to pass the buck, to make excuses, to assume the role of victim, or make blanket judgments about our own “badness.” It means admitting we are flawed and accepting the consequences of our choices and our actions. Taking responsibility means choosing to live with our face turned toward the mirror of truth, and it’s probably one of the hardest and most important hallmarks of spiritual maturity. The second thief did that. He said, “I am guilty. I did it. I own up to what I did and I accept the consequences.” By saying this, the thief put himself in a position of vulnerability, vulnerability to the truth. And by doing that, he found freedom. And I would say the freedom came before any

promise of paradise – it was the freedom of spirit that comes from being real and taking ownership of ourselves. It was in this spirit that the thief was free to ask Jesus to remember him.

And what, then of Jesus' response? "Today you will be with me"—why? Maybe it's because Jesus recognized the thief as someone, in that moment, like him, someone who accepts the consequences of his life choices. For Jesus, those choices involved standing up to civil and religious authorities who would oppress and marginalize others; they involved loving people who were considered unlovable, even though that made some people really mad. As Mahatma Gandhi said, "Humanness consists in daring to do the right thing and facing the consequences"; I like to think that Jesus' death was not some kind of required payment for the sins of humanity, but the ultimate responsibility for daring to do the right thing. Now we can't all be Jesus, or Gandhi, but we can trust in the words that Jesus said to the vulnerable thief, and resolve, with the help of grace, to take ownership of ourselves, and live our lives facing the mirror of truth. In this is freedom. In this is paradise.

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