

I recognized her immediately. She walked in with her husband who had played in the praise band last Sunday at District Conference. I didn't know him, but when they walked into the same workshop I was in for the Training Event, I recognized her immediately. When it was over, I caught up to her outside in the hall. "Sue," I said. And she kind of squinted at me and said, "Dave?" And she said, "I saw you sitting over there, but I had no idea that was you." We had gone to high school together. We had not been close friends at all, but I had been close friends with her twin sister, Mary and even closer to the guy Mary dated in high school and college and later married.

Mark was, I guess, my best friend in high school. We played freshman and JV football together, sang in Acapella choir, and were in several musicals together, and otherwise, you know, just hung out together some. The first time I ever went snow skiing was when I went with Mark and his family to New Hampshire during the Christmas holiday my senior year. Strangely enough, although neither of us would have entertained the notion at the time, Mark ended up going into the ministry, too. He's a UCC minister in Maryland.

Well, I haven't seen Mark or Mary for almost 25 years. That would have been at our 10 year high school reunion. So, there I was chatting with Sue, and she said, "You know, Mark and Mary come down all the time, and they always say, "We really ought to give Dave a call." Well, it was just a brief conversation, standing there in the hallway at Asbury church. But, I found myself thinking on the drive back home how it would be to see Mark and Mary again. I started wondering how I would feel.

You know, what I was really doing was comparing myself and the way my life has gone with what I thought might be the truth of their lives. I thought, "His church is bigger than mine." You know, and he probably hasn't lost as much hair as I have. And you know how you do. It's all those reasons why you stop going to high school reunions, or never went to them in the first place. Or, it's the reason why you hear stories about people who take dance lessons before going, or rent a fancy car to go to it in, or even have plastic surgery. I wonder why we do that: Start comparing our lives and judging ourselves by all the cultural standards that are ingrained in us?

It's not the culture of Christ, is it? It's not what we know, at our best, is the meaning and the value of our life., and yet. Well, I bet a lot of you were surprised by the gospel reading for today. You probably thought, that seems out of place. Don't we usually read that stuff during Holy Week, you know Maundy Thursday and Good Friday? And if you took a quick glance up at what Sunday in the church year today is, the reading might have still seemed strange. It's Christ the King Sunday! We could have at least had the text of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, you know and shouted a few "Hosannas!" But, instead we get Christ crucified.

It's not that much fun. You know, it doesn't fit well with the success stories that we want to tell about ourselves when we go to our high school reunion. It's not the kind of text Norman Vincent Peale would have chosen for his power of positive thinking sermons, or Robert Schuller on turning "your scars into stars," or Joel Osteen or any of those guys who say all the things we really would rather hear, about how if we just turn everything over to the Lord, we'll be rewarded, and our lives will be "successful", you know maybe I could be preaching to arenas of 20 or 30 thousand.

Isn't that what Christ being the King should mean, him sitting in glory and rewarding his faithful followers appropriately? But no, we get, "When they came to the place that is called

The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.” There, they crucified him. There, his life and his person were judged by society, by the nation, by the moral and religious leaders as worthless, or at least as harmful to society, as harmful to the national interest. It was a shameful thing to be crucified, to be given the death penalty. And, of course, the shame of it was accentuated by the fact that they would strip them naked, as they did as well with Jesus, and then cast lots for their clothes. It was a shameful thing, everyone standing around mocking these people hanging naked on a cross, the way people mock anyone who they've made into a scapegoat.

There they crucified him. There he's judged worthless, or harmful. It's what we do too I guess, maybe to ourselves first and then to others. Or, maybe it's a chicken and egg thing. It's hard to say whether we do it first to ourselves and then to others, or it's done first to us and then we do it to ourselves and back to others. It goes round and round. Our lives aren't what we'd hoped they be maybe, or at least aren't what we see that other peoples' lives are. And rather than bear to think about that for too long (you know, I think I'll just skip the reunion) sometimes we find someone who kind of symbolizes all the ways we're afraid we don't measure up and we heap all that scorn we feel for ourselves on them. Our sins on them.

That's what scapegoating is, isn't it? It's a way to try to restore at least in our own minds and maybe with some others we can get to join in, our own comparative worth. “Well, at least I don't do that!” At least, at least, at least. But, as someone has noted, punishment, like crucifixion was, is an admission of failure. It is a strategy of despair. And finally what we've failed at is first of all making our lives what we'd hoped or thought they should be, and secondly making someone else who *we* want them to be. I wonder, are those our only two options, either despair, pushing it down somewhere and skipping the high school reunion, or scapegoating?

Well, in human cultures, our own in the West, or any others, those may be the only two options. But, we declare today on this Sunday, and hopefully on every Sunday that it's possible to live instead in the culture of Christ. That's what this Sunday means: Christ the King. Maybe since we don't really live within the reign of kings anymore that would be a better name for today: Culture of Christ Sunday. Because what Jesus does on the cross is to carve out a third way between despair and scapegoating. Look at it! He stops the cycle! Even though he has been scapegoated, even though he has been judged by the surrounding culture, by the nation as worthless, and harmful to the lofty goals of the national interest, he first of all does not internalize that judgment. And secondly, he does not scapegoat his slayers and pronounce how they in fact don't measure up.

No, he breaks the cycle. He says, “Father, forgive them; for *they* don't know what they're doing.” And you see, here's the thing that I think takes quite a bit of effort on our part to even begin to get our heads around. Jesus, without any remorse or sadomasochism, loved his slayers. As theologian James Alison has said of this third way: .. “there begins to be formed within us something of a shepherd's heart which is deeply moved by humans and human waywardness.” “Please notice that 'heart of a shepherd' means being able to look at wolves in their sheepliness. It is not a question of us fearing that there are many people dressed as sheep who are in fact, wolves, but on the contrary, of being able to imagine wolves as, in some more or less well-hidden part of their lives, in fact, sheep, and to love them as such.”

Alison continues, to say, “This is what is so hard to imagine: as we become unhooked from our partisan loves, our searches, our clinging to reputation, with these formed in reaction to this situation or that, there begins to be formed in us that absolutely gratuitous (thing) ... called agape, which is nothing other than the inexplicable love which God has for us in our violence and our scandals. We begin to be able not only to know ourselves loved as human beings, but to be able to love other humans, to love the human race and condition.” And listen, that's what

Jesus calls Paradise here in this story and what he promises *today* to the one criminal crucified next to him.

See, that wasn't about the immortality of the soul. That's a Greek notion. Jews didn't believe in that. If they believed in anything like that, they believed in the resurrection of the body, not the immortality of the soul. And if Jesus had in mind strictly a resurrection to an afterlife, he would have said, "after three days in the grave you'll be raised along with me." After all, Paul says Jesus was the first fruits, the first one raised, not raised after this criminal. Jesus says "today, you'll know Paradise with me."

Look, you see what happens? This one criminal gets it. He looks at Jesus and he knows that there is absolutely no connection between the judgment of the society on Jesus and Jesus' true standing before God. And he's heard Jesus forgive his slayers and so he makes the connection – even he is loved by God! He sees that there is also absolutely no connection between the judgment made about him by the society around him and *his* true standing and status before God. His life's meaning, his life's worth is a gift from a God who loves him, no matter what incorrect or correct judgments he or his society have passed on his worth. He gets it. He sees the truth at the heart of life, beneath and beyond all appearances and judgments to the contrary.

And that's Paradise. Today, says Jesus, you'll be with me in Paradise. Friends, there's such hope for us here. There's such hope for me, you know, that maybe if Mark and Mary were to call next time they were down, I could receive that gift of renewing a relationship without any of the baggage of comparing lives? Without any of those internal judgments? And I could be free to give myself completely to the moment? There is hope and freedom in this gospel.

If you come to know yourself as really loved, actually liked by God, delighted in by God, not for who you can be if and when you finally get your act together, but as you are, as your life has gone right now, then you can step off carousel of despair and scapegoating. And you can begin this journey, take another step on this journey of living in the culture of Christ, even as you live in our own culture. Your life's worth isn't contained in any of the wrong or right judgments you or others make about you. It's a gift from God, and it's forever protected by the forgiveness and love of Christ. And it sets you free for Paradise today. May it be so for me and for you.

Amen.