

**Last Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 29
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
Luke 23:33-43; Colossians 1:11-20
The Rev'd Dr. Peter Kang**

- Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.
- I think a mentioned in a sermon a few months ago that I have a hard time understanding jokes - especially sarcasm - it eludes me. I don't understand when people are speaking sarcastically - why would you say something that you don't mean - or if you mean the opposite?
- When I was a chaplain at the prison I had a guy working for me - who always spoke sarcastically - and I would never get it and I was always so confused that we had to come up with a system - that he would give me a thumbs up when he was joking - because I would miss it.
- Why would you say one thing and mean the opposite?
- Now I get that humor can be healthy.
- Tell jokes can help us to build community and relationships - if we both "get" the joke, if we are laughing together, there is a sense of relationship and communion between us - we are "in" on the joke and share something together.
- It can also be a kind of release - of relaxation - it can even have therapeutic benefits.
 - I spent some time working at MD Anderson - and they actually had a program called "Laughter Yoga" - in which you get a bunch of people together in a room and one person starts leading them in laughter - and soon the whole room would erupt in laughter. It was strange, the leader would stand up and go, "HA HA HA HA HA HA" and continue until everyone inevitably joined in.
 - For the patients, there was some therapeutic benefit - that there is something that happens in our biology that reacts positively to such exuberance and laughter - and it can be a good thing.
- But it can also be unhealthy - our desire for humor can be a kind of avoidance mechanism - a way of not having to deal with real or difficult issues - to not think about or address troubling topics.
 - We may not want to spend the time or energy to fully engage with something, but we don't want to rest either - so we seek out forms of entertainment.
- Many people have noticed how today it seems the line between "News" and "Entertainment" is getting pretty blurred.

- The discussions about the issues and important events in our communities and the world around us - are all short - one after another - there is no in depth analysis, the presentation seems to be designed to keep you stimulated without providing much substance
- Perhaps it is not surprising that many people now prefer to get their news - or political commentary - from comedy shows, whether it is the Daily Show or the Colbert Report or SNL - our political commentary is also comedy. It seems like this might be a kind of coping mechanism - of not wanting to deal with or engage with things that might be troubling.
- It can also be unhealthy when the community building potential of humor is distorted to reinforce or create divisions - groups of "us" and "them" - "we" and "you" - jokes made at the expense of others. When sarcasm turns into mockery - we are no longer taking each other seriously or respecting them - no longer seeking to understand people who are different from us, but rather reduce them to simplistic categories
- The simple fact that they are not like us - is reason enough to ridicule - that they look, think or act differently than what we're used to.
- You see this - unfortunately - in children, teasing other kids who are different - simply because of the fact that they are different. This is often not be coming from anything mean spirited - but from the fact that they are all insecure - trying to find out who they are and where they belong. The behavior of singling out and poking fun at people who are different is a way to reinforce or establish one's membership in a group - reinforce community norms.
- And other people laugh because they want to fit in by going along with the joke
- There are also those who, perhaps for fear of exclusion, remain silent and don't say anything - even when they know that what is happening is wrong
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- Now think about the scene in our gospel for today - the story of the crucifixion - where everyone is mocking Jesus.
- The leaders scoff at him, saying "he saved others, let him save himself if he really is the Messiah."
- The soldiers mock - giving him sour wine - and saying, "if you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."
- Even one of the criminals, hanging on the cross next to him begins to deride him, "are you not the Messiah, save yourself and us."
- There is a sign posted above Jesus on the cross - I believe is meant to be sarcastic - "This is the King of the Jews" - meant to be funny - look at this fool who thought he was a king.
- There is really only one person who speaks up and says that "this is wrong" - the other criminal, hanging next to Jesus who says, "we are justly condemned" - and rebukes the other criminal, "you're being crucified right here with us - and you are teasing this man for being crucified - but we are justly condemned - he has done nothing wrong." Then he says, "Jesus,

remember me when you come into your kingdom.” This is an amazing statement of faith - there they are hanging on the cross, and yet he still believes Jesus will come into his kingdom and asks Jesus to remember him.

- Look at this scene - and think about God’s sense of humor (if you can call it that) - the way God takes a sign and gives it a different meaning - so we know that the sign, which is meant to be a joke - is actually true. Jesus is the King of the Jews - and in fact - of the world and of the universe.
- Today is the feast of Christ the King - and we are celebrating Christ’s kingship - and we see how God can take the symbol of the crucifixion and turn it around to mean something completely different
- God takes the sign of the cross - and changes the meaning from its original intent
 - Crucifixion was a punishment reserved slaves and non-citizens - used to control and oppress those who resist the power of the Roman Empire - to make an example of people and say, “this is what happens to you when you oppose us - when you break our laws.”
 - They would hang you up in a public place - put your crime above your head - and everyone who passes by would see you undergoing excruciating, terrible suffering - a death that sometimes took days
 - The intention was not just death - or to inflict suffering on the condemned - but control of the population - that people would see this awfulness - and fear the Roman Empire - that is what it is meant to do
- And yet, think about the way we view the cross today - its symbolism for us
- At youth events we sometimes ask the kids to draw images of their spiritual autobiography - and oftentimes kids will draw a cross, to symbolize God - and that is a profound statement...
- We now wear crosses, put them up around our buildings
- For the Romans this would have seemed absurd - it would be like the equivalent today of wearing an electric chair around your neck
- It is so bizarre - and yet, what God has done with this symbol is taken something that was an instrument of death and transformed it into a means of new life - a tool of oppression has now become a source of liberation - this mark of defeat becomes a symbol of victory - a symbol of Christ’s victory over the powers the world.
- Jesus wins this victory - this defeat of the powers of empire - not by force by doing the opposite of what would be normal behavior - not adhering to the norm of eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth - but preaching and teaching that you are to love your enemies - to pray for those who persecute you - to bless those who curse you”
- This is so unlike the way we normally think and behave - that sometimes when we hear the sermon on the mount, we want to dismiss it or to laugh at it as if it were a joke - “Jesus didn’t really mean that”, “he didn’t mean what he said.”

- But in today's gospel - he shows us just how much he means it - by practicing what he preached.
 - Here he is being persecuted, here he is being oppressed, his enemies surround him and what does he do? He asks for forgiveness for the people who are killing him - for those who are responsible for his crucifixion, praying "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing"
 - There he is showing us - "in fact, I did mean it - in fact, I am doing it"
- Notice - he is asking forgiveness for these people before they ask it for themselves. It is not as if they say, "Jesus forgive us for what we're doing"
- They don't even know what they're doing - and he is already extending forgiveness to them
- It is not as if they have to do something in advance to receive God's forgiveness - he's already giving it
- How are we to understand this?
- If sin is what gets in the way of our relationships with God and each other - forgiveness is the removal of that - the removing of any barrier to relationship - not holding the wrongs that a person has done against them, a removal of debt - saying, "yes we can be in a relationship, we can be in a loving communion - I will not hold this against you."
- What Jesus does for us on the cross is allow us the ability to enter into the relationship that he shares with the Father
- In this prayer where he is praying to the Father - some would say we have a glimpse of the interior life of the Trinity - this relationship between Father and Son and the Holy Spirit - the relationship of Love that is God
- As we heard in Colossians - that "through Christ God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross."
- Through Christ - God has reconciled everything - in heaven and on earth - through the blood of the cross
- Through the cross we are invited into this relationship of love - but this is not a final step - but a first step - the beginning of a new life - a new creation - a new life into which we must grow and mature, being re-made and refashioned in Christ
- Through the cross of Christ we are drawn into the mystery of the Trinity
- This is God's work on our behalf
- In this relationship - we can say we are in the Kingdom - because to be with Christ, to be in Christ - is to be in his kingdom
- When you accept that he is King, you are saying - I will obey you - I will submit my mind, my heart and soul - and allow you to be Lord of my life

- The penitent sinner on the cross - when he says “Remember me when you come into your kingdom” - there is way you could read that as “Re-member me” re-form me, re-create me - put me back together again in your image and likeness
- We are made members of a kingdom governed by a politics of forgiveness and redemption, not hate and oppression
- In this kingdom, your perspective changes - what you thought was normal changes. It changes the way you see the world and others around you. We are to grow to see as Christ does, to love as Christ loves, to forgive as Christ has forgiven us
- With this perspective change - it is not absurd - not a joke - to say we are to love our enemies, or to pray for those who persecute us, or to bless those who curse us. It is, in fact, the new normal - this is, in fact, how God sees the world - the world created by him and for him, the world he will redeem
- What does this look like in practice?
- I was recently reading the amazing story of a Trappist monk in Algeria named Christian de Cherge, about of a monastery in the 1990s (depicted in the movie, “Of Gods and Men”)
- Before becoming a monk, Christian de Cherge was in the French military, sent to Algeria as part of a “pacification force”
- There he became friends with a Muslim man named Mohammed - who was a police officer. They would sometimes go out on patrol together. One night Christian was captured by some Islamic rebels - who were getting ready to kill him, but Mohammed intervened and said “don’t do this - this is a good man - a godly man.” Christian’s life was saved - but then the next day Mohammed was killed - presumably because of his intervention in this event
- This had a profound affect on Christian - he decided devote his life to prayer - to become a godly man - and he became a Trappist monk, requesting specifically to be stationed in Algeria - there he and his brothers become embedded in their local community, tending to the sick, teaching classes - forming relationships with the local people - and came to love and respect his neighbors in the community
- In the 1990s, political unrest began to rise - and what we might now call “Islamic extremists” - armed militants - began killing Westerners in Algeria. The monks were faced with a choice about whether or not to leave - and preserve their lives - or stay in this community that they had committed themselves to - and risk death
- When it became clear that their lives were very much at risk - Christian wrote a letter - a kind of testament - sent to his family, to be read in the event that he was killed. In this letter he asked those who love him to pray that he is worthy of such sacrifice - and expressed his fears that his death would be used to accuse and dismiss the Algerian people and Muslims as a whole - that they all would be reduced to simplistic categories and dismissed. But he had come to love these people. So, he writes:

- Obviously, my death will justify the opinion of all who dismissed me as naive or idealistic: “Let him tell us what he thinks now.” But such people should know that my death will satisfy my most burning curiosity. At least I will be able—if God pleases—to see the children of Islam as He sees them, illuminated by the glory of Christ, sharing in the gift of God’s Passion and of the Spirit, whose secret joy will always be to bring forth our common humanity amidst our differences.
- There he is saying - if I am killed (and he was killed) - people will say “this is what you get” - “now talk about the virtues of living in community with Muslims” - but, he says - my death will satisfy my curiosity - to see these people as God sees them, to see the children of Islam illuminated by the glory of Christ, sharing in the gift of God’s Passion and of the Spirit.
- He ends his letter with thanksgivings -
 - I give thanks to God for this life, completely mine yet completely theirs, too, to God, who wanted it for joy against, and in spite of, all odds. In this “Thank You”—which says everything about my life—I include you, my friends past and present, and those friends who will be here at the side of my mother and father, or my sisters and brothers—than you a thousandfold.
- This is the letter that will be read at his funeral - and he is thanking those gathered - thanks be to God - and then he says something profound
 - And to you, too, my friend of the last moment, who will not know what you are doing. Yes, for you, too I wish this thank-you, this “A-Dieu,” (which also means, “to God”) whose image is in you also, that we may meet in heaven, like happy thieves, if it pleases God, our common Father.
- He is talking about the person who will kill him - saying, “you will not know what you are doing” - repeating the imagery we hear from Christ in today’s gospel - and saying, I see God’s image in you as well - and praying that “we may meet in heaven like happy thieves, if it pleases God our common Father”
- What does it mean to love our enemies - to pray for those who persecute you - to bless those who curse you?
- I think maybe Christian de Cherge gives us an example - an example of a martyrdom that is not just dying for the faith - but being a witness to the power of God’s kingdom. He is a martyr made possible by Christ’s death. His life is a witness that allows us to glimpse what it means to be drawn into the life of God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - the life that was nailed to the cross.
- What it means to have your life re-formed, and re-remembered - and re-shaped according to the likeness of Christ, our King - who loves all of us - who prays, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.”