

“Christ the King and My Mother” by Teresa Kaiser

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Reign of Christ (Christ the King) Sunday

Keeping your eyes on the prize.....don't be fooled by appearances. Luke 23: 33-43.

Good morning. This is the last Sunday before Advent and is known as Christ the King Sunday. On this day I would like to speak to you about death, my mother's death that is and what it taught me about her and to connect this lesson to today's gospel from Luke.

That Luke's gospel about Jesus death is read on the last Sunday before advent creates a symmetry of sorts. The journey from birth to death is complete and we begin again next week with pre-birth of Jesus. In spite of this symmetry, today's gospel seems a little odd for Christ the King Sunday. As the gospel begins we find Jesus hanging on the cross between two thieves....low lives. Not where you would expect to find a king, right? This disconnect of our expectations and the reality is evidence that our expectations don't do much for us as predictors. More about that later....

The gospel paints a picture of a very, very dark time. We are going through a very, very dark time right now and there are similarities

for sure. The world in the gospel is a world of cruelty and chaos. Dignity and life are purchased cheap. In such an evil environment, the Jewish leaders ask the Roman occupiers to kill Jesus. They make this request because they fear Jesus influence with the people, not because he has done or failed to do anything of import. Ultimately, the Romans agree to kill Jesus for the Jewish leaders. First, Jesus is tested with insults and torture and then he is hung on the cross between two men that Luke calls criminals. We watch along with the Jewish people and disciples, frightened at the power of evil, feeling powerless, and wondering how God could let this happen. Could he not have prevented this atrocity? Why didn't he? Do these questions sound familiar yet? The Romans hang Jesus on the cross as a status degradation ritual. A status degradation ritual strips a person of honor and it permits people to abuse the person. This tool was the Romans' ultimate punishment and reserved for the worst offenders. One of the criminals joins with the soldiers in the verbal abuse of Jesus, attempting to elevate himself by mocking Jesus.

This is an ironic scene. Throughout his ministry, Jesus identified with sinners, shared fellowship with them and therefore incurred the shame of sinners of all kinds. Here we see him suffering the public shame afforded criminals, some of the very sinners he championed.

Where are Jesus' followers? His disciples? Why did they run away instead of fighting? Why didn't they prevent this atrocity? Why aren't they with Jesus, advocating for him? Why is he alone?

But Jesus is not alone. One of the criminals admonishes both the other criminal and the soldiers to leave Jesus alone for he is innocent. He cries out for justice. What is this all about? How does he know Jesus is innocent? The gospel doesn't tell us. We must read between the lines to figure this out. If the criminal knows who Jesus is, he must have seen Jesus before and, more importantly, he must have heard his message, the message of forgiveness and love. He formed the opinion that Jesus is the Messiah and that Jesus is innocent. The righteous thief knows who Jesus is and he knows who he is himself, a thief, a bandit and that he knows that he is being rightly punished. Still, he asks Jesus to remember him when Jesus comes into his

kingdom. He recognizes that the crucifixion will not compromise what Jesus came to do. He boldly asks Christ the King for a pardon, a pardon a king can grant. Jesus grants that pardon, assuring the thief that "truly I tell you, TODAY you will with me in paradise." This is Christ the King, dying on the cross but still thinking of others.

The conventional religious people of the day missed Jesus' message, but many outsiders opened their eyes and hearts to Jesus, and recognized his kingship and what it entails. Can we open our eyes and recognize what Jesus kingship entails? Can we look past how things appear and recognize the truth of how they are? Our hope is not in the denial of our reality but in the acceptance of our reality and in trust in the mercy of the Messiah of God. Can we see in this crucified teacher Christ the King? Can we see that Jesus remains the steady center regardless of the circumstances?

Jesus displays leadership in an unexpected place, on the cross. This is the real leadership we chose to follow. Jesus leadership does not urge fighting back, does not complain, does not waiver but never forgets its purpose, love and forgiveness for all. Jesus says a simple but profound prayer "Father, forgive them." He knew that his persecutors did not realize what they were doing.

Let me turn now from the last day of Jesus life to the last days of my Mother's. Mom and I, and perhaps some of you, identify with the repentant criminal on the cross who was fully aware that he was a sinner, and deserved punishment, that his punishment, death, was fair. Jesus offers us forgiveness and love, and we wonder, how can that be? Why? How? We forget that the King can pardon if he chooses. So it was with my Mom.

Mom grew up in a world of cruelty and chaos. At first she tried to deny her reality with alcohol, but with the grace of God and the program of AA, she decided to live differently. She turned away from her selfishness and sought to live as God would have her live, in right relationship with the Holy One and in service to others. But she was acutely aware of her past sins. Mom was a legacy Catholic who remained a catholic until death. The Catholic Church teaches that a

person must do certain things in order to obtain God's forgiveness, earn forgiveness so to speak. Mom wanted the salvation Jesus offered, but was afraid that she hadn't "earned" that privilege and that her sins were too great or that there was something she failed to do to receive a pardon.

Before I go into that further, let me step back to give you some context and tell you the back-ground story. In the fall of 2015, Will and I participated in a silent retreat at Day Spring. We were seeking discernment about whether to attempt to lead a Guatemala pilgrimage. During the week-end I felt reassured that if we did lead a pilgrimage, all would work out fine. And then I received an intuitive thought in the form of a question... What about your Mom? I was startled. What ABOUT my Mom? She was 89 years old, living alone, and in good health. Nevertheless, I intuited that would change. Sure enough, within a month Mom had the shingles, a painful immune system disease caused by the zoster virus in older adults who have a weakened immune systems. Her vision and the ability to move one arm were compromised. She could no longer drive. She hated that. Over the course of the next nine months Mom's health deteriorated until she was hospitalized and clearly dying. Will and I went to Seattle for 2 weeks at a time in March and June and then again in August. I didn't know what to expect in August, I knew Mom was dying, but I knew God had a plan.

I had heard that God doesn't call the qualified, that he qualifies the called. This is how it worked in our case. My sister Michelle is a nurse. She is a nurse who has thirty-years of experience. Mom, and I guess I, always assumed that my sister Michelle would be the one to care for Mom at the end of her life. God had other plans. God's plan was for me to provide the care. I didn't understand why, but I cooperated and did my best. Mom and I are close, at least once we both got sober we became close. Our relationship has been a source of joy for us both and a gift from God for sure. Now God summoned me to care for her, another gift. God also supplied the grace to help me do this with love and tenderness, another gift. God sent Will with me, and my brother John, my sister Michelle, a niece and nephew, my daughter Bridgette, and hospice, more gifts.

The expectation many of us have of caring for a dying person is that there will be much sadness, tears, etc. That was not so for us. When we arrived in Seattle, we had a day or two to get Mom's house ready and then she was released into our care through hospice. Mom came home in an ambulance and was set up in a hospital bed in her own room. Her room was full of balloons, pictures of loved ones, and some treasured origami my grandson Owen had made. Mom also had a stuffed animal given her by a grandchild that was supposed to be a cat but looked like a dog so Mom called it "Dat" for dog/cat. I saw how much Mom loved her life, God, AA, her family, her friends, her house, her cat. Mom was joyful to be home and cared for by loved ones. She was alert and in good spirits. Mom was also very playful. Some examples, She grabbed my hair and braided it...the first time ever! She wanted to go for a wheel chair ride around and around her house and with the help of my daughter Bridgette, she did. She wanted morning coffee...even though her stomach could not digest a thing. She had me show her the bottle of mouth spray before I gave it to her, pretending that I may have been "confused" and was putting the wrong thing in her mouth. She kicked off her covers to exercise her legs for when she would walk again, kicking her feet up in the air. She tried to escape from bed even though she couldn't walk. She wanted a birthday party and she got it, and she wore a tiara and her best necklace for the party. She was grateful, thanking God for every little thing and every big thing. For 29 years of sobriety, for 90 years of life, for having her oldest grandchild come all the way from Washington DC to care for her, for being able to hold her 3 week old great-great granddaughter Ophelia.

It wasn't all easy though. Mom was dying of cancer that had spread throughout her body. She was aware of this and of her dependence. Mom had always treasured her independence. Self-reliance is a character defect that Mom and I share. It was hard for her to be so dependent on me. I had to feed her, to wash her face, clean her teeth, change her diapers, change her clothes, bring her medicine, etc. She had no control of the fluids draining from her stomach or other parts of her body and she felt bad that I and others had to clean her. I did my best to remind her that she had done so for me as

a child and that her body had been my first home and had served us both well. It only helped a little.

Just like the young ones can say profound things, things that are beyond their years of understanding, so can the old. As I was cleaning Mom up one day, she blurted out that she felt hideous and hated it, that she felt like a burden and ugly. I assured her that she was not ugly but very, very beautiful. Her face brightened and she said, "Oh, you see my soul!" Another example, one morning she awoke and told me that she had seen heaven. I asked her what it looked like and with rapture written all over her face she said "it is warm, and it is light, and there is so much love,,,,,,,,,,,,,"

Yet, she was afraid to let go and die even though she said she was ready. She asked me if I thought that God would forgive her all of her sins. I reminded her that God loved her so much that when she was at her worst in her alcoholic misery, he had loaned her His strength to quit drinking. Surely God loved her then. How much more must he love her now that she returned that love? I reminded her of all the ways recently that God had shown his love for her...that all her grandkids had gone *en mass* to visit her in the hospital to the surprise and amazement of the staff and other patients, of the visit by her 92 year old best friend, of the visit of her AA sponsor, of the two AA meetings we held in her room, of the two visits within 10 days of priests bringing communion, of not one but two birthday parties a week apart, of her presence in her own home with family care as she prepared to die, that she was granted the time to reflect on her life and prepare for the next, weren't all these gifts but signals from God of His love for her? I reminded her of our 12 step journey, how we invited God to re-make us and that he had done so, that we had received a spiritual awakening and experience his presence in our lives, that we knew God not just knew of him, and knew we could trust his love. I told her that when she died she too would be with Jesus in paradise with her three sons and husband and that I hoped that I would be along shortly. I reminded her that Jesus had already paid for our sins on the cross and we had no more debt. As she listened, she relaxed and found peace. We prayed with her, read her from the

scriptures, from Jesus Calling, from Day-by-Day. We sang her hymns, told her stories, shared lame jokes, rubbed her hands and feet, and she prepared to join her maker. We said prayers of gratitude for her life and for her coming journey home.

Although I had no idea at first why God had wanted me to be the one to care for Mom, I have come to realize that more than her nurse, I was to be her spiritual guide for the final portion of her journey. One more gift from God to Mom and to me.

I had hoped to share so much more about what I learned, but there are time limits which I honor so I will merely summarize and close.

Forgiveness and love, are the purposes of Jesus life among us. He calls us to the same purposes. Forgiveness and love are the messages I found in witnessing my Mom's death and the messages found in today's gospel. Is this a coincidence? As we say in AA, I think not.