

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

November 23, 2025 (Christ the King C)
Luke 23:33-43

Not EVERYONE who takes up a life of crime is all that SMART. Sometimes movies or television GLORIFY criminals. They make them appear sophisticated, even COOL. But MOST criminals don't even come close. Just do an internet search for "stupid criminals," and you'll see what I mean.

Like the guy who walked into a little corner store with a shotgun, and demanded all the cash from the register. After the cashier put the money in a bag, the robber saw a bottle of SCOTCH on the shelf BEHIND the counter. He told the cashier to put IT in the bag as well, but the cashier refused and said, "I don't believe you're over 21." The robber said he was, but the clerk STILL said he didn't believe him. So, the robber took out his DRIVER'S license and gave it to the clerk. The clerk looked it over, and agreed that the man was indeed over 21, and he put the scotch in the bag. The robber ran from the store with his loot, and the cashier promptly called the. They arrested him two hours later. Not the sharpest tool in the shed.

In 2008, a man named Ruben Zarate attempted to rob a muffler shop in Chicago. After demanding money, he was told that most of the cash was stored in a safe that could only be opened by the manager, who wasn't scheduled to come in until a few hours later. To save himself some trouble, Zarate left his cell phone number for the store to call him BACK once the manager arrived. Of course, the store called the police first. Not the brightest bulb on the tree.

In 2010, Albert Bailey and an accomplice decided to rob a BANK in Fairfield, Connecticut. But in an attempt to speed up the process of the crime, Bailey called the bank in ADVANCE to let them know that they were coming to rob it, you know, to give the bank TIME to get the money READY, so he could just pick it up and leave QUICKLY. Of course, it wasn't the money that was waiting for him when he arrived. Not the fastest car on the track.

The Gospels tell of ANOTHER stupid criminal. Jesus was hung on a cross between TWO criminals. And according to Luke's Gospel, ONE of the thieves JOINED the mob that was MOCKING Jesus. He hurled insults at Jesus: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

Of course, some criminals are SMARTER than others. The OTHER criminal had a better GRASP of what was happening. He rebuked his partner in crime. "Don't you fear God," he said, "We are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

Then he turned to our Lord and said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And THAT REQUEST might be the GREATEST ACT OF FAITH in ALL of scripture. Because, what is it BASED on? What does he SEE on that cross? What EVIDENCE does he HAVE?

He sees a man he has NEVER MET, a STRANGER. He sees a person so BEATEN and BLOODIED, that he's nearly unrecognizable. He sees a man much NEARER to death than he is, because he'd ALREADY been beaten and flogged, nearly to the POINT of DEATH. He sees a man that didn't have the STRENGTH to CARRY his cross to Golgotha. The soldiers made ANOTHER man help him. He sees a man MOCKED and INSULTED as he DIES HELPLESSLY.

And yet, he sees something MORE than that. He hears Jesus say, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." WHO DOES that? Who FORGIVES his MURDERERS AS he DIES? WHO DOES that? JESUS does that. And this criminal knows IMMEDIATELY that this mysterious figure, that they keep CALLING the MESSIAH, is NO ORDINARY MAN.

This CRIMINAL, hanging on his OWN cross NEXT to Jesus, sees the TRUTH. He sees MORE than the OBVIOUS, more than ANYONE ELSE can see, more than even the DISCIPLES, who had given up hope and ABANDONED him – he has the FAITH to SEE and BELIEVE that this DYING JESUS is the one who WILL SAVE the WORLD. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

The contrasts of this moment COULDN'T BE ANY STARKER. People that had only DAYS EARLIER waved palm branches and proclaimed him KING as he ENTERED Jerusalem, were now MOCKING him OUTSIDE the city, calling for his EXECUTION.

In a place reserved for criminals, hangs the INNOCENT one.

In the midst of his SUFFERING, Jesus promises a place in PARADISE.

In a place dedicated to DEATH, Jesus promised LIFE and HOPE.

The soldiers MOCK Jesus by hanging him BETWEEN two criminals, like a king between two cabinet members, not realizing that THIS CROSS IS Jesus' THRONE.

Like Peter's DENIALS earlier, they INSULT him 3 TIMES. The leaders SCOFFED at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself IF HE IS the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The SOLDIERS MOCKED him, "IF YOU ARE the King of the Jews, save yourself!" Even one of the CRIMINALS derided him, "ARE YOU NOT the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" THREE TIMES, they ALL say the SAME thing: "SAVE YOURSELF" – the SAME thing the DEVIL said back at the BEGINNING of this gospel – AVOID the pain and suffering of the cross.

But Jesus WON'T DO that. He REFUSES to come in POWER, to even DEFEND himself, but INSTEAD comes in COMPLETE VULNERABILITY.

He REFUSES to call down VENGEANCE on his tormentors, but INSTEAD, FORGIVES them.

He REFUSES to come DOWN FROM his cross to PROVE his kingly status, but INSTEAD SUBMITS to that instrument of torture and humiliation.

They put up a sign over his head that said, "This is the King of the Jews." They were making FUN of him, but NONE of them REALIZED that IN their mockery, EVERY WORD THEY SAID was ACTUALLY the TRUTH. He IS the Christ. He IS the King.

I love this quote from James Alison (Jesus the Forgiving Victim; Listening for the Unheard Voice).

The cross is Jesus saying, "...the only way I can get it across to you that I LIKE you is by occupying the very WORST space that ANY of you can come up with, a place which you typically think I like to put people in. I DON'T. It's YOU who put people there, YOU at your very WORST. I'll OCCUPY that space, to show you that I'm NOT out to GET you, that I REALLY DO LIKE you."

It's said that the WEAKEST thing there IS in our world is to DIE, but the most POWERFUL thing that JESUS did, the most powerful thing he COULD'VE done, was to DIE. And not just ANY death; he died a CRIMINAL'S death, a HUMILIATING death. Christ's WEAKNESS COULD have been the END of CHRISTIANITY, but INSTEAD, it WAS the BEGINNING. Christ's weakness COULD have proved that he WASN'T the Messiah, but INSTEAD it proved that he WAS the Messiah.

In WEAKNESS, in the weakness of being BORN as a CHILD, in the weakness of being COMPLETELY DEPENDENT upon his MOTHER and upon GOD, in the FOOLISHNESS of the CROSS, THERE IS POWER; there's LIFE. IN JESUS, God comes to us IN OUR HUMAN WEAKNESS, because we don't have the POWER to come to GOD OURSELVES.

We have a king that came to US, so that we could SEE God, see what LOVE LOOKS like.

We have a king that made HIMSELF WEAK so that WE could be STRONG;

a king that DIED so that WE could LIVE;

a king who refused to save HIMSELF, so that he could save US INSTEAD.

We need to remember that CRIMINAL, who saw Jesus at his WEAKEST, and realized that this is PRECISELY WHERE GOD MEETS us. Precisely IN our WEAKEST moments – in our failures, in our pain, in our sadness, in our grief, in our brokenness, THAT'S where God meets. In the REAL world, in OUR world, because Jesus comes to US. THAT'S the kind of king we have.

Jesus comes to US. All WE need to do ... is CRY out like that criminal on his cross, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Amen.