

Jesus, Remember Me
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When Jesus was executed, two criminals were killed along with him. One of these criminals said to Jesus, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Sing with me. (It's #488 in the hymnal, but) many of you know it by heart. Join me ...

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Jesus said this as he was dying on the cross. He said it to one who had been convicted of a capital offense and was dying with him, "You will be with me in Paradise".

Jesus gave no quiz, demanded nothing. He did not ask, "What do you believe?" He did not ask about his stance on current issues, theology or morals. Certainly he did not ask of this criminal, "Have you been good?"

Said this convicted criminal, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Replied Jesus, "Yes! Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."
Jesus, remember me.

The word "remember" is a wonderful word! It is related to "member". Prior to wide circulation of the Authorized 1611 King James translation of the Bible, "member" had referred to a part of the human body – a hand, a foot, a heart, ... Then in the English Bible's translation of Paul's letters to the church at Corinth, Paul uses a crude metaphor for the church as "The Body of Christ" and speaks of

each of us as “members” of that body. Paul’s metaphor and its translation in the King James Version changed the English language.

Modern English, however, continues to use the archaic sense of the word “member” when it speaks of “dismembering” – cutting a body into pieces. As the criminal dying with Jesus pleads, “Remember me,” he begs to be put back together even at the moment when he is being totally destroyed by a degrading execution. “Yes,” says Jesus, “Yes!” “You will be remembered!” “You will be with me today in Paradise!”

Think of it: The only story we have of Jesus promising someone that they will be remembered, that they will be with him in Paradise, is this story. “You will be with me today in Paradise.”

So then -- who will not be remembered by Jesus if we know that the first to be affirmed as being with Jesus in Paradise is a criminal? If that is so, will other criminals be excluded? Will those who disagree with us? How wonderful this love of Christ is -- a love that reaches out as he is dying, not only to those who are killing him (Forgive them, Father) but to the criminal being executed with him. This love has no boundaries!

When Jesus remembers us, we are put back together again, whether in this life or in the world to come. When we remember sisters and brothers who have passed on to the church triumphant, they are, in our very act of remembering, brought back together with us in the living body of Christ. This is why, whenever we share the bread and the cup, we join not only with those physically present, but with the whole church of Christ, including the communion of saints. The body is “re-membered.” It is put together again!

Here in these days in Fort Worth, Texas, some of you have “carried” as you pursued legislative goals, others have “lost”. We who have been claimed by Jesus as part of his body have found ourselves at odds with each other. But recall the words of Paul about the importance of every part of the body of Christ. We belong to each other and are organically inter-related.

We as United Methodists have changed and grown in many ways over the years. We began as a small fire in John Wesley’s heart and offered a ray of hope for the broken world. God’s movement expanded around the world through many faithful workers. God’s hands touches east, west, north and south in the earth

until we are a global church. How grateful we are as the United Methodists in this amazing and un-limited grace of God!

It is such an evidence for us in these two weeks of the General Conference that God expands and challenges us to what is the centrality for Christians; giving space for others to be; acknowledging that reality is made up of others; loving others by appreciating their differences. So in this beautiful communion of The United Methodist Church, no one is less faithful and less honorable as a member of Christ's body. We are all equal and beloved by God. We belong preciously to each other.

"Re-membering" is both painful and wonderful.

Today we gather together and remember our sisters and brothers, those who have faithfully served our United Methodist Church and gone from our midst. What gifts they brought to us as a church! What sorrow their passing brings to those who loved them dearly! But as we name them in our hearts and minds today, they are remembered. The body is brought back together!

We also remember the tragedies in our past of war and violence, of holocaust and dehumanization. We remember those who since we last met have been killed in the war in Iraq and Afghanistan -- those sisters and brothers of ours who served with the armed forces, and those many more of God's children who lived in Iraq and Afghanistan -- some fighters, but mostly civilians, caught in the crossfire. We also remember many victims in Darfur, Sudan, Kenya and Palestine/Israel in conflicted times.

We also remember those whose lives were destroyed and uprooted by Katrina, the tsunami and other natural disasters. May God remember each one of them and continually comfort their families and friends.

We also remember the many lives impacted by the recent violent acts that claimed the lives of students and teachers on the campus of Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University and other campus communities. We pray for our young people and those feeling a sense of vulnerability, isolation, insecurity, and fear on their campuses, and even in their everyday lives.

When I was a young boy, my friend and I were playing along the shore of the Yellow Sea. Our single nation of Korea had been divided into North and South by the super-powers following World War II. For years during my childhood the

“Korean Conflict” had been taking place. Brothers in the north had come to fear brothers in the south; sisters in the south feared those in the north.

I remember that day when this friend Hak-Woon and I were playing on the shore. He spotted something interesting in the water. He reached for it. It was a mine that exploded upon touch. Instantly nothing identifiable of my friend existed anymore. But I remember him. In that remembrance I wish for the reconciliation and peace in Korean peninsula.

We remember those who have needlessly died from starvation in this world. The earth produces enough to feed every human being, but poverty prevents so many from access to basic sustenance. Meanwhile the garbage cans of the affluent overflow with uneaten bounty. In the Labor Day today we remember those who labor long hours for low wages and struggle for dignity and basic human rights.

I personally remember that I was one of the men next to Christ on the cross who were judgmental and pretty self-righteous. When I first became a Christian I was rigid and judgmental.

So as a young Christian I came to believe that my new ways were absolutely “right,” that everything of my Buddhist, Confucian and Shamanistic past was to be totally condemned. At that time, I had so much to learn. When my father died, I, as an arrogant young Christian, refused to participate in the rituals surrounding death that brought meaning and closure to my mother, siblings and wider family. They went to the mountains with his remains, as our traditions required.

I stayed resistant to follow traditional family rituals. They brought prayers to the god beyond us all, but I refused to pray since this god was not specifically named as the God of Christians. My understanding of Christianity as a young convert had more to do with rejection of everything that seemed not specifically Christian than it did with adopting the ways of Christ. It was not until much more recently after my graduate study that on a return to my home village, I made the mountain pilgrimage to my father’s grave. I repented of my arrogance and made peace with my father and my past. I have experienced release and freedom in my heart.

And for those who protest that the Bible is too difficult, I'm reminded of Mark Twain's famous quote, "It's not the parts of the Bible that I don't understand that bother me, but the parts that I do!"

We know many of the things Jesus considered "blessed." We know his views on violence and the non-violent life he himself led. We know of his eventual openness to every sort and category of person he encountered, how he continued to welcome the outsider. We know how he forgave even those who executed him. Twain was indeed right: It's the parts of the Bible that we do understand that really bother us! They call us to follow Jesus!

We, The United Methodist Church, stand at a crossroads. Where are we?

We find ourselves in a debate between those who would like the church to be more flexible in nonessential matters, more open, and those who would like the church to be clearer about its boundaries, more pure.

One could argue that those who espouse greater openness are holding fast to biblical principles of hospitality. Those who desire clarity in matters of boundaries, however, are adhering to biblical principles of holiness. Both holiness and hospitality are excellent values. Both are biblical values, and both are right.

Of course, they can also both be wrong. The problem is this: When we concern ourselves only with holiness, we become rigid and inward looking. We make an idol of our purity. When we concern ourselves only with hospitality, however, we lose our sense of who we are. Our identity is blurred and we lose the language of our own faith. Our attitudes and beliefs become ambiguous and, at worst, we no longer know why we are Christians or what holds us together. Either holiness or hospitality can become a problem if we pay attention only to one dimension and exclude the other. Instead, we are invited to live in the tension that is created by holding both values—holiness and hospitality— together at the same time.

We stand at a crossroads again.

A United Methodist has authorized and has carried on a war against Iraq. Other United Methodists, including the Council of Bishops, have felt compelled to say, "That is not what Christ has taught us!" We know "loving our enemies" is not a phrase invented by an old 60's liberal, but a command from Jesus Christ.

Some United Methodists say they cannot be a part of a church that does not condemn virtually everything other than the dominant and traditional understanding of sexual orientation. Other United Methodists have suggested that God's creation is beautiful in its diversity and everyone is deserved of God's welcoming and unconditional love feast in Christ's church.

As a former seminary faculty, I retain deep respect for theological learning, but Christianity is not about being "theologically correct". It's about following Jesus. The basic question is not what we intellectually believe about him, though this is not unimportant. But at the heart of it all is the question, "Will you follow Jesus?" "Will you follow Jesus?"

This is what John and Charles Wesley understood so well: At the core of our faith community is not the proper observance of rites and rituals; at their core is not correct belief. "If your heart be with my heart, give me thy hand" continues to be Wesley's invitation, not to worship alike or believe the same things, but together to follow Christ. YES, our focused mission is "making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."

The story takes place shortly after the execution of Jesus. His once faithful disciples are despondent. They are plodding, one foot after the other, to Emmaus. A stranger joins them and talks with them. But they don't get it. Filled with fear, sorrow and despair neither their eyes can see nor their ears hear that miracle that is in the midst's. The risen Christ is with them, but to them he is a stranger. He is a stranger until sometime after they arrive at Emmaus.

As they ate together, he took the bread and broke it. He blessed it. He gave it to them. Suddenly they remembered! The body was restored! This stranger they now recognized as the risen Christ! The dismembered body was now remembered! Why had they not recognized him sooner? That's a mystery we will never solve. But somehow, as they shared this blessed Eucharistic bread together with this stranger, the disciples became aware that he was again present in their midst! Christ is risen, indeed!

The body of Christ was remembered! Though they had been separated from Christ, they were brought back together. They were remembered! Restored! Such mystery is beyond our comprehension, but how glorious it is!

It is not we who save ourselves by having the right opinions about Christ, but Christ himself who saves us – just as we are! It is not that we do such a great job

of remembering Jesus, hard as we might try. It is Jesus who knows us, who remembers us, who promised to remember even the criminal who died with him. If Jesus promised to remember even such a one as him, one with such abysmal qualifications, cannot he be trusted to remember us as well!

Jesus' arms stretched on the beam-extended to release our sin, to receive all in love, to invite us to new life. In God's paradise we find in plenty all forgiveness and healing, reconciliation and comfort, joy and abundant life.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, God's saving and transforming love is yours. It is unconditional, unlimited and requires no return in the divine mystery!

Ask him to remember you! He will! Ask him!

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.
Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Amen.