

Good morning! This is Sunny Ahn, the Senior Pastor at Kona United Methodist Church. Last Sunday, we had a Sabbath Worship created by Bishop Grant Hagiya, the Cabinet, and the Conference Staff of the California-Pacific Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church. I do appreciate their effort for giving me, many clergies and worship teams in our conference a break last week. Thank you.

This is Week #10 of having Online Worship at Kona United Methodist Church on this Memorial Day weekend. It is the day of remembering.

**[Story]** I remember a story about a city fellow, John, who was visiting relatives on a farm. The farmer, Sam, gave a whistle and his dog herded the cattle into the corral, and then latched the gate with her paw. “Wow, that’s an amazing dog. What is her name?” John asked. The forgetful farmer, Sam, thought for a moment, and then asked, “What do you call that red flower that smells good and has thorns on the stem?” “A rose?” John replied. “Yeah! That’s it!” The farmer Sam turned to his wife and shouted, “Hey Rose, what is the name of this dog?”

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There are times when we, humans, can be quite forgetful. Been there, done that, haven’t you? What is your worst happening of forgetfulness? Did you ever get in your car, reach for your keys and didn’t have them? Or you couldn’t remember your own phone number or house number? Or the street where you lived? How about the password for your Facebook or email account? Do you remember what day of the week today is?

This weekend is known as Memorial Day Weekend, established in 1868 as a day to honor the fallen soldiers of the just concluded Civil War. Memorial Day has grown to become a solemn recognition of the servicemen and women who were, and still are, willing to pay the high price of our freedoms. Let us have a moment to pause to show our respect to them now. Let us pause. *[Pause]* Thank you for your service and sacrificial giving.

We also today remember and appreciate the members and friends of Kona United Methodist Church who continuously uphold our church with your prayers, your

presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness. Your selfless giving has made Kona United Methodist Church strong even in this pandemic. Thank you.

Of course, we are remembering our Lord Jesus Christ today. Telling the truth, the Bible itself is a memorial to the greatest sacrifice that will ever be made. It is a record of the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ....for you and I....and for every man, woman, boy and girl here this morning and who have ever been born.

The purpose of Bible reading, studying, and preaching is to remind us of who God is and who we are. Today we are here to remember who God is, and also who we are, through the encounter of two dying men on the cross with Jesus.

The scripture passage we're looking at today reminds me of an old western movie. When we read today's scripture, Luke 23:39-43, there seems to be a clear good guy and a bad guy. And we cannot help, but we want to side with the good guy if we must choose one to side with. It's the story of the two thieves who were crucified beside Jesus.

All four Gospels in the Bible—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—tell us that Jesus was crucified alongside two other men, but only the Gospel Luke gives us their full story. It's pretty clear who is the good guy and who is the bad guy between the two thieves. The bad thief speaks first, ridiculing Jesus for claiming to be the Messiah, yet being unable to save Himself from crucifixion. The good thief, on the other hand, snaps back at him and speaks well of Jesus. He asks Jesus to remember him when He comes into His kingdom.

So right off the bat, we've got our white hat and our black hat. But what do we really know about these two thieves? Well, for starters, we don't know that whether they were thieves or not. In fact, we don't know a lot more than we do know about them.

In Matthew's and Mark's gospels, they are called ληστής (*lestes*) in Greek, which could be translated thief or robber, but it was also a term for rebels or insurrectionists. In other words, someone mounting a rebellion against the Roman government. We also know that crucifixion—as the most painful and humiliating form of execution—was reserved primarily for two types of criminals. The first is the slaves who had committed a crime. Just a regular thief would not have been crucified but a slave, who stole from his master, might have been. The second is the rebels trying to overthrow Roman rule.

If these two men crucified with Jesus were in fact thieves then they were most likely also slaves. But it's just as likely that they were rebels, enemies of the state. After all, that is what Jesus was charged with and why He was being crucified.

Interestingly, in Luke's gospel, they are not been called ληστής (*lestes*). They are not thieves or rebels in the Gospel Luke. They are called κακοῦργος (*kakourgos*), 'criminals, evil-doers, wrong-doers.' The original Greek word Gospel Luke uses literally just means a "wrong-doer." It's vague. It could mean any kind of wrongdoing. I think that Gospel Luke uses this vague word, κακοῦργος (*kakourgos*), intentionally. I think Luke is hoping that we will be able to see ourselves in these two wrong-doers at the cross. He wants us to step into their shoes and see how their story is our story, too.

Of course, we don't want to see ourselves in either of these thieves. We want to see ourselves in the good thief if we must put ourselves in one of their shoes. We immediately identify with the good thief and picture him in a white cowboy hat. I imagine most of us would like to believe that, if we had been there, we would have recognized Jesus as our Savior just like the good thief did. We would have scolded the other thief for mocking Him. We would have pronounced Jesus' innocence. We would have asked to be remembered by Him, and He would have promised us Paradise. We like to think we would have been the good guy in this story.

The only problem with that theory is that the so-called 'good thief' is not really a good guy. In fact, he says so himself. When he's rebuking the other thief he says, "we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds" (vs. 41). Whatever he's done, whether he's a slave or a rebel, he knows he's done wrong and so has the other criminal. And he knows it because between them hangs a man who has done nothing wrong. When this good thief looks at Jesus, he's convicted of his own wrong doing, and he's compelled to confess it. That's the first thing the good thief teaches us: None of us is good next to Jesus. All have sinned...all have done wrong...and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

So, the reason we come to call this guilty thief on the cross "good" is because he recognizes that he is not good, and he recognizes also that the only one who can save him is Jesus. Admitting that we're the bad guy is never easy or fun. Admitting that we have done wrong is not easy. Confessing our specific sins is even worse. Yet it's the only way we'll truly know the significance of Jesus as the One who

saves. Surgery is never fun or easy, but if it's the only way we'll get well, then surgery is wonderful! Maybe that's why the good thief seems to have found peace on that agonizing cross, while the bad thief is hopeless. The good thief has turned his eyes upon Jesus and seen his Savior, and that's all he needs to have hope.

Do you feel lost in the darkness of life? Turn your eyes upon Jesus if so. Fix your eyes on Jesus and see your Savior there. That's all you need to have hope in hopelessness.

Some of you may notice that I have not said much about the bad thief on the cross. It is because Jesus doesn't say much about him either. In fact, He says nothing. He doesn't rebuke him or condemn him. After the bad thief mocks Jesus, we don't hear anything else from this bad thief or about him. We don't know how he responded when the good thief rebuked him. We don't know how he reacted to Jesus' words of promise to the good thief.

But, I take that silence as a sign of hope, see hope in silence, because my God whom I believe never gives up on His children—good or bad. There is, at least, a chance that the good thief pulled this bad thief out of his pride and cynicism. Maybe he was able to see Jesus through the good thief's eyes, and maybe that made all the difference. Maybe before his last breath he asked Jesus to remember him, too.

I want to be clear: No one knows whether this bad thief had a change of heart or not. We're not even given any hints, but just silence. In this silence, I realize that what really matters now is how we will respond. No matter how deep our sin goes, no matter how much we have done wrong, there is hope for us at the cross.

Two dying men encounter Jesus in their darkest moment of life, and yet they respond differently. In the pandemic we all are going through together these days, how would you respond to Jesus who is in pain alongside with us, who is present with us? Do you see Jesus or hardship alone? To where do you turn your eyes upon? The choice is yours. Amen.