

Westminster Sermon – Remember Me
St. Andrew's Sunday, November 20, 2016
Scripture: Colossians 1:11-20, Luke 23:33-44
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We celebrate St. Andrew's Sunday on the final Sunday of the liturgical year, also known as Christ the King Sunday. Our first reading is Colossians 1:11-20. In this early Christian hymn, we gain insight into the meaning Christ had for his first generation followers as the image of the invisible God, the first born of creation, and the head of the Church. Listen now for God's word.

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from Christ's glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of God's beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in Christ all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through Christ and for Christ. Christ himself is before all things, and in Christ all things hold together. Christ is the head of the body, the church; Christ is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Christ God was pleased to reconcile to God's self all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross. Amen.

In our second scripture reading, **Luke 23:33-43**, we read Luke's account of the crucifixion and the paradox of a King who absorbs the hostility of the world, who embraces the injustice of the cross, and who saves others by not saving himself. Listen to what the Spirit is saying.

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, God's chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Amen.

The title of the sermon: Remember Me

The text: Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." **Luke 22:42**

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, we thank you for the longing within each of us to be whole and to be remembered by you. May the mercy and justice of your kingdom be more prevalent in the world

today. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

One of the gifts I received for my birthday this year is a sterling silver bracelet with the first verse of “Amazing Grace” inscribed on it. What makes the bracelet especially interesting is that it is a Möbius strip. Discovered independently by the German mathematicians August Ferdinand Möbius and Johann Benedict Listing in 1858, the Möbius strip is a surface with only one side and one boundary and has the mathematical property of being non-orientable, with unique and mysterious perspectives. An example of a Möbius strip is a circle with a half-twist, creating a continuous loop, like the bracelet I received.

The endless, continuous loop, with only one side and one edge, was made famous by the illustrations of M. C. Escher in which figures seem to walk endlessly along paths and up and down stairs. The Möbius strip is the ultimate metaphor for something simple, yet profound; something mysterious, yet scientific. Non-orientable, the Möbius strip takes us to an unexpected place, again and again, connecting our beginning and ending. Ultimately we return from whence we came.

Dr. Parker Palmer, Educator and Quaker, refers to the Möbius strip in his book entitled *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey toward an Undivided Life*. He contends that the choices we make and the way we live our lives reflect the core of who we are. Because the outside and inside surface is the same on a Möbius strip, there is no place to hide our true self!

Dr. Palmer encourages people of faith to honor their spiritual lives, to nourish the core of their being, their inner light, their soul, the true self, whatever one wants to call this dimension of our being. We do this within community through prayer, self-reflection, accountability, attentiveness, mission and service, acts of generosity.

My husband Peter, the scientist and mathematician in the family, was the first to point out the Möbius strip design within the bracelet and what a powerful metaphor this is for the beloved hymn “Amazing Grace,” a highlight of St. Andrew’s Sunday presented with bagpipes and drums. As you read the lyrics along the bracelet, mysteriously and profoundly you are brought back time and time again to the opening words “amazing grace.”

Some of us know the story of John Newton who wrote “Amazing Grace,” probably in the year 1772. Newton lost his mom to tuberculosis when he was only seven years old and joined his father on the sea by the age of eleven. He worked on slave ships in the slave trade for several years. After experiencing a Christian conversion Newton would eventually renounce this trade and become a prominent supporter of abolitionism. Subsequently, he was ordained as an evangelical Anglican cleric and served for two decades. During this time Newton offered advice to many young people including Hannah More and William Wilberforce both of whom were instrumental in the abolitionist movement.

Finally, thirty-four years after he retired from the slave trade, John Newton broke a long silence and published a pamphlet in which he described the horrific conditions of the slave ships and apologized with a *confession, which comes too late... it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shutters.*

John Newton lived to see Britain's abolition of the African slave trade through the passage of the Slave Trade Act in 1807. He had come full circle on the Mobius strip of his spiritual journey and found his soul healed and forgiven.

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see.*

This week we lost a respected journalist too soon. Gwen Ifill died at the age of 61 and was eulogized with respect and affection by her colleagues. I was particularly touched by the references to her faith. David Brooks wrote in the *New York Times*:

“Every reminiscence written about Gwen will describe her smile. It was not subtle. It shone from her face like some sort of spiritual explosion. Once, during a walk through Rock Creek Park, she told me that if she didn't go to church on Sunday she felt a little flatter for the whole week. A spirit as deep and ebullient as hers needed nourishment and care, and when it came out it came out in her smile, which was totalistic and unrestrained...Gwen worked in a tough business, and being an African-American woman brought its own hardships and scars, but Gwen's smile did not hold back. Her whole personality was the opposite of reticent, and timidity was a stranger to her... Gwen was ebullient, but she was not soft. She was authoritative, an executive and confident.”

David Brooks went on to share a remembrance which particularly warmed my heart. One night Gwen gathered with friends “around the piano and sang civil rights anthems and hymns. Everybody knew the first stanza to ‘Amazing Grace,’ but only Gwen Ifill knew the last three, which she sang alone, in honor of the past labors and future promise.” Gwen's journey on the Mobius strip of her spiritual life was one of integrity and strength, both as a person of faith and as a journalist.

*Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come,
'Tis grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.*

When our Savior came home at his crucifixion, those who were present taunted him relentlessly. The threefold scene of mockery in Luke's gospel is carried out by the leaders who ridicule Jesus, the soldiers who mock Jesus, and one of the two criminals crucified with Jesus who blasphemed him. Through the irony of these taunts, Luke underscores Jesus' identity as our Savior and the meaning of his death. Jesus is the Messiah who saves others by not saving himself. Jesus is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end along the Mobius strip of eternity.

While one of the criminals crucified with Jesus joins in the mockery, his partner in crime comes full circle, rebuking the sarcasm, confessing his need for forgiveness, and affirming Christ as his Savior. *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*

Through the amazing grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, ultimately we return from whence we came. We come to an unexpected place, again and again, in the unending circle of praise and we find our home in the One who created us:

*When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun.
We've no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun.*

Amazing Grace... so be it. **Amen.**