

First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, Good Friday 2005. “You will be with me in paradise.”

Just last week I found out some difficult news. One of my neighbors, a woman I trust very much, found out that another of my neighbors is a registered sex offender. It was rape, first degree rape, 20 years ago. He lives next door to me.

I have always felt safe in my building and my neighborhood. I know there is crime and that I have to be relatively careful, but we look out for each other, we observe our comings and goings, we feed each other’s cats when we are away and have extra sets of keys for each other when we lock ourselves out. We buy girl scout cookies from the little girl downstairs and give each other banana bread and Chex mix for Christmas.

Yet, I don’t know this man very well, this registered sex offender. I am not sure I could even point him out in a line up if I had to, even though he literally lives in the apartment next to me. And who is to say, maybe he has been rehabilitated and has paid his time in prison. And I know that there are sex offenders, rapists, robbers, and all others sorts of criminals that we meet every day, on the street, in the Laundromat, in the subway. And I know that they are even inside of this church this afternoon and will be here on Easter morning. And I know we all have our own demons, our own crimes we hide, we are all criminals really, in the radical root of the word, but our crimes aren’t all on a website for everyone else to see like a registered sex offender. And with all of this I still don’t want to know that a sex offender lives next door to me, a single woman with no man in sight to protect me. I think I would rather be living in ignorance.

I would rather live in ignorance so I don’t have to worry about the pre-teenage girl that lives on the first floor. When I first heard the news my neighbor and I were most concerned about the children in the building who I hope haven’t had to learn how to defend themselves yet. But then I came home late one night all by myself and was terrified entering my building for the first time ever, wanting to avoid the criminal on the third floor. Usually I think I am safe when I enter the front door and hear the click of the lock, but this time, I wondered where my safety began and ended. This was really pushing all my buttons. Painful experiences came flooding back. I began thinking about all the women I know who have been assaulted, harassed or raped. There are very few women I know who haven’t been. The list was growing long.

As I tiptoed up the steps I was reminded of this old Ani DiFranco song—Ani DiFranco is a songwriter of my generation, the song is called the Story and it goes: “I would have returned your greeting if it weren’t for the way that you were looking at me. This street is not a market and I am not a commodity. And don’t you find it sad that we can’t even say hello. Because you are a man and I am a woman and the sun is getting low.”

And climbing each step to the third floor I began to grow thankful for the karate and self-defense I have taken over the past year. If only I knew that my body could prevent violence and abuse from being afflicted years ago. If only I really knew that I didn't deserve it, if only I could have protected myself by avoiding vulnerable situations. But these little girls in our building, and boys for that matter, I hope haven't had to learn how to protect themselves the hard way. Regardless of how prepared I am, any of us are, we still live in a world of relative safety. So I gave thanks again, this time for the extra deadbolt lock I have on my door that gives me a discounted rate on my renter's insurance. I give thanks for the ways in which I can separate myself from others, even though this isn't what Jesus does.

Jesus' stories exemplify throughout Luke's gospel that it is the outsiders that have the insight. For our sake, Jesus was born in a stinky, nasty, dirty stable to unwed parents. And it is predicted that he would be the Messiah. And he was called to let the oppressed go free. He healed those with disabilities because they were ostracized from the community. He made the lepers clean. He ate and drank with the tax collectors. He raised children from the dead. He forgives the sins of the woman who anointed his feet, the woman who showed him love and compassion and understanding. And I get all excited when I read this, yes I do! I get all excited about the oppressed being let free, about structures of power that give some power over others being challenged and reconfigured. But Jesus' last company being convicted criminals? I don't know about that. My experience this week puts all of my excitement about letting the oppressed go free in check.

It wasn't a rape victim hanging next to Jesus on a cross asking for him to remember her when he comes into his kingdom. It was a criminal, a guilty criminal at that. And of course I don't want to look at the crimes that I have committed against myself and humanity. It was a criminal, one of them, on that cross that perhaps had been ostracized his whole life for the crime committed, perhaps a criminal that had done jail time and had admitted his crime. Or perhaps not. We don't know anything about his story, other than the fact that he was guilty. Not a thing. All we know is that Jesus died perceived a criminal. All we know is that when everyone was deriding Jesus, challenging him to prove himself by saving himself and the criminals around him, it was this criminal who said "enough." It was this criminal who knew his life was over and was tired of people judging him, and so he shut up his angry comrade who wanted Jesus to save him and said "we are all here, being judged. You and I. We are all at the end. He doesn't have to prove himself."

I don't think it is the criminal's criminality that gets him the promise that today he will be in Paradise with Jesus. But instead his experience of rejection gives him empathy for Jesus' rejection. Up until the moment of his death we are reminded that Jesus stands and sits and hangs with those who are most judged by society. This doesn't mean that I have to put myself in vulnerable positions with my neighbor or that I need to become his best friend or that I need to trust every one who walks down the street. But I do have to take seriously the fact that my neighbor, while a registered sex offender, is still a child of God and has insight in the world. He has his own story and experiences.

The reality of the institution of the criminal justice system in the United States of America is that each individual story and experience is not valued. Those who are subject to it are not treated as children of God but instead are far too often treated as guilty before proven innocent, that God's grace doesn't extend to them, that they have no chance. The system isn't working. I have done my reading and know the statistics that point to the reality that the troubled and flawed nature of our country and world is magnified and exacerbated within prison walls. I have visited prisons, in this country and outside of this country to know that the criminal justice system is not impartial, it is dehumanizing, it is a very scary place, it is deeply broken, it does not prepare people to leave prison walls and do anything differently. I have family members and know of others who have been at the mercy and hands of prison guards and our courts. I have heard the stories, I have seen the abuse. No wonder Jesus speaks with such kindness to the criminal on the cross.

A few weeks ago I preached at the Church of the Gethsemane in Brooklyn, a congregation that reaches out to prisoners and former prisoners. First Church was a founding force in the life of this small yet vibrant congregation and continues to support its ministry. At the end of the service we pray for those who are on death row, regardless of their culpability. It is a powerful experience to pray the names of men whose stories I do not know, some of them guilty, some of them not. Their criminality is not what matters. Jesus was executed as a criminal in between two convicted criminals. It hit me that day, afresh and with urgency. We have no right to play God with our system of execution, we have no right, regardless of the criminal's criminality to decide whether or not they are redeemable or no longer a child of God.

The grace of God extends far and wide. God chooses us and holds us all close, regardless of whether we choose God. No matter your crime, Jesus is at your side. No matter how we experience death, Jesus dies with us and is raised again. Jesus dies on a cross in between two convicted criminals. No matter how despicable or judged we feel we are, Jesus wants our company, telling us that today we enter into Paradise with him.