

When You Can't Do It Yourself
A Sermon for Every Sunday
Luke 23:33-43

I.

The beginnings of the self-help industry have often been traced back to a book written in 1859 by a man named Samuel Smiles. Published the same year as Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, Smiles' book was simply titled *Self-Help*. In a time of great change and upheaval, Smiles' notions of a self-made man caught the imaginations of his readers. As did his contention that "heaven helps those who help themselves."

Today the self-help industry is worth about \$10 billion according to market researchers. And it has expanded from books to television shows, blogs, workshops, retreats, and TEDtalks. All in an effort to help people improve their productivity, their love lives, their parenting, you name it. It is clear that we, as a people, are all too aware of how far we fall short of all the standards of beauty, success, and happiness we see around us. And we would give just about anything to find ten easy steps or five new habits that would save us from ourselves.

II.

Three times in our scripture for today Jesus is told to save himself. "If you are the Messiah," the leaders scoff, "then save yourself!" "If you are the King of the Jews," the soldiers cry mockingly, "then save yourself!" Even one of the criminals, hung on a cross next to Jesus, says derisively, "If you are the Messiah...then save yourself! And us!"

Over the course of his earthly life, Jesus had performed signs and wonders. He had tamed nature as he calmed storms and walked on water. He had healed people of their illnesses and cast out demons that held them in their grip. He had fed thousands with one boy's lunch and turned barrels of water into the finest vintage of wine. Crowds had begun to flock around him to hear his powerful sermons and his down-to-earth stories. They had begun to believe he truly was the Son of God.

But now he hung on a cross. Abandoned by his followers. Held tightly in the grip of Roman authorities and powers that were ready to crush the very life from his lungs. Vulnerable and bleeding and surrounded by taunts and insults.

Perhaps he heard the echoes of Satan's voice at his temptation when Satan had said, "If you are truly the Son of God...feed yourself...claim your power...overcome the laws of gravity and mortality...Come on Jesus. If you are who you say you are, then prove it!"

At the cross the taunts were the same: "He saved others, let him save himself. Save yourself, Jesus! Save yourself, and us."

III.

Today is called Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the church year, before we start all over next week with the first Sunday of Advent. On this day we are invited to look back and remember all that we have learned about Jesus and our faith over the past year. We are invited to come to him with worship and praise to kneel before his throne. We are challenged to once again claim Jesus as our Savior and our Lord.

But when we read our Scripture for today, we do not see an exalted and powerful king but a Christ who has been crucified. Throughout the story there are symbols of royal power, but

each of them seems to mock the idea that Jesus has any power at all. Above Jesus' head, Pilate has posted a sign, "King of the Jews." It is not a title, but a reminder of the charge against him. Jesus has been lifted up, not on a throne, but on a cross. The crown he wears is made of thorns. The places at the right and left of Jesus are not occupied by his royal advisors but by criminals being executed. The royal court is made up of those who offer Jesus vinegar and wine, mocking him, and gambling for his royal robe. What kind of king is this?

And maybe more to the point: what are we to do with this crucified king? One who refused to save himself from the cross and one who does not seem to save us from our own crosses either? What kind of king is this who allows such suffering to exist in our world? Knowing what we know, we would prefer to be our own rulers, taking charge of our own lives, pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. It is easier to read self-help books than the Gospel. At least then we have a little hope that through our own efforts we can avoid that sort of pain.

III.

No, Jesus is not the sort of king we expect. And maybe he isn't really the sort of king we want, if we are honest with ourselves. But this crucified king should not surprise us. After all, he was born to a poor teenage mother in a world that could find no room for his bed. When she sang him songs they were songs about a king who would scatter the proud and bring the powerful down from their thrones. They were songs about lifting up the lowly and giving the hungry good things to eat.

The friends this king gathered around him were a motley crew of impulsive people, somewhat slow on the uptake, who would eventually abandon him in his hour of need. He ate dinner with anyone who invited him, on tables and on hillsides, with rich and poor, sinner and

righteous alike. This king preached about how the first would be the last and the last would be the first. How the greatest among us would be servants. This king talked about turning the other cheek and giving up our coat and our cloak. This king told those listening that anyone who wanted to save their life would lose it. And that those who lost their lives for his sake would learn what salvation truly meant.

It turns out that Jesus wasn't ever playing by the rules we have all agreed to in order to make it in this crazy world. The rules about winning and losing and survival at all costs. Instead he came to turn the rules on their heads, to upend the power structures of his day and ours, and to teach those who would follow him that God was with them: not just in their victory and in their power, but also with them in their defeats and in their darkest hours.

IV.

Jesus refused to save himself because he came to save us instead. And the salvation he offered was not a get-out-of-pain free card. He didn't come to rescue us from being human. Instead, he came and dwelled with us in our humanity. And experienced it all with us, to the very end.

In the moments when we realize we cannot save ourselves from suffering, we give thanks for this sort of God, who meets us even in the depths of our own brokenness and sin, coming to us with words of forgiveness. Looking out over the crowds at the foot of the cross, Jesus saw powerful men who had made horrible decisions. He saw soldiers still holding the hammers that drove the nails into his hands. He saw those who had denied ever knowing him, the ones who mocked him, and the ones who stood silent in the face of his pain. He sees us there, as well. And he says, "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do."

In the moments when we realize we cannot fix or repair or help ourselves, when we find ourselves completely unable to do anything more than cry out, we give thanks for a God who does not abandon us or leave us alone. “Jesus, remember me,” the criminal at his side begged, “when you come into your kingdom.” When the self-help books and seminars fall short, and we are confronted by our need for one more powerful than ourselves, we cry out to God: Remember us. Remake us. Reclaim us, Lord. And Jesus says, “Today, you will be with me in paradise.”

At the cross we are confronted with the great mystery of a God whose power is made perfect in weakness. We are confronted by a God who humbled himself, even to the point of suffering and death. And this is the great hope of our faith and the great promise of our God: That Jesus reigns both in our joy and in our sorrow, in our power and in our pain. In the beauty and in the brokenness of life, we find a King who assures us that *despite* of, not because of, our best efforts: We are remembered. We are forgiven. We are, in fact, saved.

AMEN.

—*Kristin Adkins Whitesides* © 2019