

Dear Church of the Apostles family,

Today, Sunday, March 29th. is the 5th and final Sunday of Lent. If we were able to worship together and continue with our Lenten series *By My Hand For My Sake*, we would be hearing from the mother of Dismas. You may be thinking, “Who is Dismas?” Though his name is unknown by most, the Church has given the thief on Jesus’ right, a name so that we might remember the grace that was bestowed that day so long ago.

On that day, so long ago, Christ took it upon himself to offer a personal invitation to one special, repentant, forgiven soul. The thief (of all people) – at Jesus’ right, who shared that day, Jesus’ humility and pain in a way that we will (God willing) never understand – that thief, Dismas, cried out to him, “Remember me...”

For it is that grace, not that thief, that is so memorable here – that self-same grace that Jesus offers to each one of us, with arms outstretched upon that cross, hands spiked and full of blood. It was in the posture of humility and pain that Jesus opened the doors to paradise.

Seeing love like that – love that loves fully and unconditionally the most unlovable, sinful, pathetic of people – can do no less than change forever the way we ourselves view love.

I hope you will indulge me as I share with you what the Thief’s mother was feeling that fait-filled day, so long ago. In her, we will find a hint of how life-changingly strong the love of God can be. This is what she might have said that day:

“It’s over ... finally. He’s dead. No, not the one called Jesus; he has been dead for some time now. It’s that one, there, to the right of Jesus. My son ... Dismas.

You’ve heard of him, of course, my son the malefactor. You’ve heard the words of his mouth, both cursing and then confessing. But have you ever thought he might have had a MOTHER? A mother standing in shame among the crowd at the foot of his cross? You’ve heard his words; I heard them too. I said, ‘Standing in shame,’ because that is the way I felt this morning, following – at a great distance – as those three went slowly up the hill to Calvary, carrying crosses. Shame – what else? Deep shame. For my son had been sentenced to crucifixion. No other punishment has had shame attached to it like crucifixion. Shame because the worst, the most detestable of humanity, are crucified. The corrupt, the trash, and worse. Shame, because they were hung there ... unclothed ... the last final shred of dignity stripped from them.

Ah, but the shame I felt for my son is nothing compared to the shame I felt for myself, shame to think that this is what I had led my son to be. Yes, I. Somehow, I felt – I knew – that I had failed him. And was that why he chose a way of life that marked him as a loathsome creature of humanity? What had I done? What had I failed to do?

As I look back, two memories return to haunt me now. First: As he was growing up, somehow, he never could be good enough for me. 'This child will not turn out like so many,' I vowed. 'This one will be a true and faithful son of Israel.' The rabbi taught; I taught ... and scolded, always pressing for more. Children are raised in accordance to the faith tradition of their mother – I am Jewish. And when it was time for Bar Mitzvah – I was so proud; he did well!

Then, just as he was entering his teens, my husband – his father – died. I should have drawn closer to my son through that, but instead – somehow – I felt resentment, hurt, pain when I was around him. He reminded me of him, my husband, and I missed him so. I threw myself into trying to survive now that I was a widow. No time for my son. Forgetting that my son had pain too.

Then, suddenly ... he was gone. That is ... I mean ... he didn't run away like some ungrateful prodigal, demanding his share of the inheritance to spend and waste in faraway places. No, he didn't run away, as such. He just wasn't around anymore. I never knew where he was, or when he might appear ... or not. Oh, there was contact of sort. Usually it was when he needed money – to bail him out or cover a loss because of something he had done. I sent some money, yes, but I wouldn't go to see him. I couldn't. I was becoming bitter. After all that I had done – training, home – he had thrown it all away – totally!!!

How totally? I found out when the word came: Involved in another fracas, another drunken brawl. He had brutally killed a companion over nothing. And they caught him, as they had so many times before. Only this time the judgment was, 'No more. No more will he be allowed to brawl, to hurt, to kill.' He was condemned to die. That would be the end of it, once and for all. To die ... on a cross!!!

I came here hiding myself. He dare not see me! If he did, he would not understand. I wasn't here to scold him, to shame him. I'm here to face my guilt, my shame. My son there on the cross – do you see? I had nailed him there!!!

I told you that when I came here, I felt shame, despair, hoping that it would not last too long. But I stand here now at this moment, and everything has changed! It's hard to believe, but I do believe it. I heard it with my own ears. My son ... my son is now in heaven! Removed from all the shame, the guilt, the pain.

How? By that one, that one who hung there alongside my son. Despite the mocking, the cursing, the unrelenting ridicule, that one was innocent; he was crucified even though he had no guilt. Everyone knew that. He had even taken the place of one who was to die with my son, a Barabbas, one who is now free. I know that he was innocent. And more: I now know – I firmly believe that he was the one, God's chosen One, the Messiah promised, the Savior, God's Son next to my son. I saw the words of Isaiah fulfilled before my eyes: "*He was numbered with the transgressors.*" I saw it with my own eyes.

And so did my son, my son there hanging helpless on the cross, life draining from him, drop by drop – he saw! ... What I now too believe: This is God's promised one – promised to Eve and Adam long ago when paradise was lost by disobedience, and death began. This is the answer to the soul's most urgent prayer.

Prayer – did you hear my son's prayer? I have never heard anything like it. It was I who taught him to pray – his father and I – but this prayer ... only he knew how to pray this prayer. 'Remember me when you come into your kingdom.' Those words were a confession of hope – hope anchored in this one who was dying with him. But dying for him. And that hope was not left unfulfilled, for I heard this man called Jesus, promise him, *"Today ... you will be with me ... in paradise."* Paradise, heaven, with the Lord, with the Messiah, in mercy. Our heavenly Father had saved my son by giving his Son.

A prodigal son has been welcomed home ... and another child of the same Father sees his need as well. My guilt, my shame, my shortcomings. I waited too long to welcome him home ... but now he waits to welcome me. I know that that is true, for from my son I too have learned to pray: *"Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom!"*

(At this point the mother walks to the cross and removes the crown of thorns she had placed there before she began to speak to the congregation. She would look at it for a time; nod YES once, then look up, toward the sky and smile ... then walk down the aisle.)

I close with this Affirmation of Faith, a solemn declaration that serves the same purpose as a strong belief:

We are not alone; we live in God's word. We believe in God: who has created and is creating, who has come in Jesus, the word made flesh, to reconcile and make new, who works in us and others by the Spirit. We trust in God. We are called to be the church: to celebrate God's presence, to live with respect in Creation, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil, to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope. In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God!

May this Affirmation of Faith allow you to remain connected with the Word and God, while enabling you to move ahead during these uncertain days, with confidence in God's grace and the knowledge that you are never alone – God is always with us. Amen.

Blessings for our journey,

Pastor Narda