

# The Reverend Gregory R. Morisse

*“Fear & Salvation,” Sunday, November 24, 2019*

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## Front Quote

“On Thanksgiving Day we acknowledge our dependence.”  
William Jennings Bryan

## SCRIPTURE READING

Luke 23:33-43

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, his 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.”

## SERMON

Today is *Christ the King* Sunday. Which is why, this close to Advent and Christmas we find ourselves so close to Good Friday and Easter. If this were a movie, this is the scene before the opening credits. The teaser of what’s coming later. Right after the opening song finishes, the words show up:

“Three years earlier...”

In the first century, Jerusalem and all of Israel was in exile... again. They were conquered by Rome. Israel had some autonomy, but they weren't free by any stretch.

The Messiah was a hope for freedom. If you lived in Samaria you were looking for a New Moses; if you were a Judean you wanted the Messiah to reclaim the throne of King David.

In some big dramatic way, you expected the Messiah to deliver a victory as decisive as when the divided Red Sea collapsed on the Egyptian armies, drowning every soldier, chariot and horse. The Messiah was God's general; the one to lead us into battle against our foes. With God firmly, finally on our side, and as importantly, *against* our enemy, we would remove the unworthy for their thrones of power.

This was how political change took place in Jesus' time. If you didn't like who was in power, you built an army and conquered your enemy. You attacked them with every tool you had to delegitimize their authority until you could reclaim the seat of power for yourself.

Today, I believe we call this "regime change." God help us all, we might even call it "the presidential primaries." They start earlier and earlier – *Hey, has anyone checked which year Pete Butteigieg is hoping to be voted in? Is it possible that maybe he's just got a really be jump on the primaries for 2028???*

Jesus recruited no warriors. He gathered no army. He set up no headquarters. He walked around; he taught wisdom in riddles; he healed the poor and outcasts. He confused everyone. He did not cozy up to the political elites to get their support. He spent his time amongst the unstable, the questionably moral, and the riff-raff.

If he was to reign, one wonders what kind of King planned on being.

Without an armada of force, without a warchest of reserves, the people came to believe that Jesus would liberate Jerusalem single-handedly. Victory would not come by military might; but by sudden divine catastrophe. A new version of hope took root amongst the people. They would not be drafted into the effort; it would happen on their behalf!

But, it all went wrong. Nothing went as we thought. Now he hangs, naked, beaten, bloody, moments away from death. This was *not* how it was supposed to go.

"Aren't you the Messiah?" the first criminal asks. "You're supposed to free us. You're not supposed to die."

Two other criminals hang, one on either side of Jesus. One is terrified. The other is trying to start a theological debate: "Do you not fear God?"

"Fear" is one of those words with a different meaning in a church context. Throughout scripture, we are instructed to *fear* God. For a long time, I thought I was

supposed to be *afraid*. God, with his lightning bolts, molten fire, and all-seeing eye. If we interpret “fear” as “fright,” the second criminal’s question leads us to a scary place. “Are you not afraid of God?” As if it were the almighty Father who planned and set up the execution of his Son. And that to question God’s plan would earn you more wrath?

But, “fear” in scripture has a deeper meaning: not *panic* or *terror*, but *awe* and *admiration*. Closer in meaning to *faith*. A better translation of the criminal’s question might be: “Do you have no *respect* for God?” “Do you not *trust* your God to redeem even this terrible moment?”

In the midst of a crucible moment, in the harried throes of death and purpose, I appreciate the second criminal’s thoughtful, even prayerful inquiry. A gentle reassurance that while the circumstances we face may *seem* impossible, God’s love, is still true, neverending, never-failing.

But – yah, no – I’m with the first criminal: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Dude, save yourself! Save *me!*”

It’s a good question.

Why *doesn’t* Jesus save himself? Why *doesn’t* Jesus hop down off the cross? He can’t possibly be afraid of the guards, can he? This is the man who turned water into wine! (My favorite of all the miracles.) This is the man who turned a few loaves of bread into overflowing baskets. (Which, I suppose if you’re drinking a lot of “water” comes in handy.) This is the man who raised people from the dead! Jesus has some *serious* power! Why does he suddenly go limp? Why doesn’t he fight back? Why didn’t he look Pilate in the eye and pull out some Marvel’s *Avenger* moves and prove to everyone that he’s the *man!*?

We are those criminals. And their questions are as relevant today as they have ever been. Questions of fear: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Why aren’t you saving yourself and me?” Questions of salvation: “Do you not revere God? Why do you question your redeemer?”

These are questions of power and agency.

I was listening to the radio this week. (I promise this is not a political rant or a policy endorsement.) They were talking about Elizabeth Warren’s plan to tax billionaires – the ultra rich.

And, let’s just get a little context. Billionaires have a lot of money. A nauseatingly lot of money. 1 million seconds is 12 *days*. 1 billion seconds is 32 *years*. So when we debate tax codes for the ultra rich, we’re talking about our *ethics*, our *values*.

I want to say it was Bill Gates, but one of the like, 12 billionaires in the country said something to the effect of: “Look, I want to give my money away. I’m giving away hundreds of millions of dollars a year to charity. It’s my money; I should get to decide where it goes.”

It dawned on me: the argument against taxing the uber rich is not about economics; it’s about *power*. These billionaires aren’t against giving up *money* per se; they’re against giving up *choice*. They don’t want to give up their *power*.

Now “power” is a word we use a lot, and without a clear definition. Power is *influence*. It is the capacity to make changes to your environment. It’s not about feelings or perception; it is about *resources*.

“Vulnerability,” on the other hand, is *exposure* and *risk*. When one individual or group is afforded greater influence and more resources, then another party is put in the position of having fewer resources and is left exposed.

I have more power from 10:00am to 11:15am on Sunday mornings than you do. You’ve given me resources – this robe, this stole, this microphone – to impact what we do in this time. As a result, you are made vulnerable, exposed as it were, to whatever middle hymn I have chosen.

Now, there has been valuable work of late exploring emotional vulnerability. Authors like Brene Brown encourage us to explore a spiritual openness and authenticity which can be holy and hard. And there is a certain kind of “power” that comes with it, a measure of personal strength and confidence that comes with self-awareness.

That’s different than the power I’m talking about.

Stephen Covey talks about your “sphere of concern” – that circle in which all the worries and troubles that burden your soul. War, poverty, the decline of American penmanship, whathaveyou... Within your “sphere of *concern*” is your “sphere of *influence*” – those things you can actually do something about.

I think about my responsibility – my response-ability; my ability to respond. I decide my words, my movement, my choices. I have control over my voice, my body, and my decisions. Even, with practice, my feelings.

Power is *influence*. It is the capacity to make changes to your environment. It’s not about feelings or perception; it is about *resources*.

This kind of power is relational, and it plays out in a number of arenas – gender, race, education, wealth, ability, language, citizenship. Each of us has within us some ways in which we have more agency, more capacity, and some ways in which we have less. And power is not just an individual characteristic. It is connected to the world in which we live.

I might be a stronger swimmer than you, but when I'm also in the current of the river, I've got a double-whammy of power.

Here's the thing, though, in my experience we humans are much more prone to notice our weaknesses. We pay close attention to those places where we don't have control. Power has a curious way of becoming invisible, hidden from perception.

How is it that white people feel powerless to challenge racism and confront white supremacy? Am I not part of the group in this equation with more influence and greater resources?

How is it that men feel attacked by the #metoo movement? Am I not part of the group in this dynamic with more power and greater agency?

How is a billionaire going to complain about being taxed more heavily? Oh, I'm sorry, you won't have unilateral control to choose which charitable organization gets your millions of dollars? You won't get to decide on behalf of us all which social issue gets priority? Putting our resources into a commonwealth, into goals that we collectively discern and decide upon is not great travesty... it is called citizenship.

I don't think this first criminal is given nearly the credit he is due. We dismiss his question. "He's just panicking." Or, "He's a criminal, so he's just selfishly looking to get out of a jam."

Maybe it's more comforting to side with the "good" criminal? The who seems to know what he's talking about, who shows the proper respect, who defends Jesus' innocence and willingly accepts his conviction. He dares not ask anything of Jesus.

And yet, wasn't it just a few weeks ago when Jesus said: "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance"? Doesn't Jesus teach us to seek, to ask, and to knock with the promise that we will find, that it will be given, that the door will be opened?

While we're at it... Jesus does not often side with the proper or the respectable. Nor does God. Throughout all our sacred texts, both Hebrew and Christian, God chooses to share wisdom and truth through the lives of the outcast and the insignificant. Abraham and Sarah the old couple without any kids. Jacob, the younger, clawing, cheating brother. Moses, the murdering stutterer on the run. Ruth, the stubborn, widowed daughter-in-law. David, the runt of the litter. Jesus, the peasant from Bethlehem. The disciples, poor, dim-witted fishermen. The woman at the well whom Jesus loved. The Syrophenician woman who called out Jesus for his racism and exclusion.

The criminal on the left wants Jesus to save him, because he does not yet know that he can play a part in his salvation. That he must. It is not fear that holds him back, it is the misperception of his power.

The criminal on the right wants to ignore or forget Christ's actions, the choices Jesus made that led him to be crucified by the State. Jesus knew what he was doing when he confronted the religious, economic, racial, and gender injustice of his day. Jesus knew where his actions would take him. To suggest that his crucifixion was somehow just a case of mistaken identity is to misunderstand Christ's power.

Even on the cross, Jesus is the Messiah. His death does not contradict all that came before. He could have avoided this death if had wanted to. He could have fled Jerusalem as soon as Judas betrayed him. He could have challenged the guards who arrested him, or killed Pilate during the interrogation. He could have turned that cross into a catapult and conquered Rome.

But, in doing any of that he would have undermined the justice he taught, the very way of peace he was still teaching; he would have ignored the resources and power that was bestowed upon him as the Messiah. Jesus guides us to the kin(g)dom of God. The cross is part of the lesson, not a disruption of it.

Next week, we begin the season of waiting, of contemplation and expectation. A little child will be born, a Messiah blessed by the Most High. What do you think? Will he come to save us? Or to show us the way?