

"There was once a young man who grew up in a small farming community. His father was of the third generation to plow, plant and harvest the family farm. He milked 40 head of cows, raised pigs and sheep, and tended 150 acres of land with the help of his four sons.

The young man loved the land. He spent his childhood wandering its hills and valleys, swimming and fishing in its creeks, picking its wild nuts, berries and fruits, and learning from his father all of the techniques of farming that had been passed down and learned and improved upon by three generations. And, when he was old enough, Josh Watson decided to go away to college to study agriculture and learn even more ways to improve the family farm.

Josh's father was proud that his son would follow in his footsteps, and those of his grandfather and great-grandfather. His greatest desire in life was to have their family farm continue to be passed down from generation to generation. He went on farming with his three younger sons until the eldest, newly graduated from the University, came home at last to rejoin them.

It was only a matter of weeks after the young man's return, however, before trouble began to erupt. Josh began to share his newly acquired knowledge and ideas and bombard his father and brothers with a plan on how to accomplish the farm work more efficiently, more productively, and more safely. Not only did he openly criticize some of his father's methods, but began to lecture neighbors and friends as well. Contour plowing, eliminating the use of DDT, stopping run-off of manure and pesticides into creeks and rivers: each thing he suggested opened a new wound. A mid-morning coffee break at the café in town, or a conversation over the corn grinder at the feedmill, often resulted in harsh words and bruised egos.

'Who does he think he is, anyway?' the neighbors asked.

'Yeah, old Ben Watson would turn over in his grave if he could hear the things that young'un wants to do to 'his' farm.'

'The kid's still wet behind the ears. Let him try his new ideas and fall on his face. That'll teach him there's a difference between real farming and book learning.'

And when his own father admitted that the young man's ideas were too radical for him, as well, Josh Watson became quite depressed and withdrawn. He began to consider his options, and within four months he left home to join the Peace Corps.

The young man traveled to strange, distant lands, where food, water and hope were scarce. He learned right away that attitudes everywhere were similar to those of his family, friends and neighbors. But the young man had regained faith in his own ideas. He believed that God had led him to those who needed his knowledge the most. Within four years his careful planning and implementation ended the famine. New sources of fresh water were located and wells dug. Irrigation systems were devised and put to use. New farm animals were introduced for food and to provide eggs, milk and cheese. Josh applied all of his training, and the farms began to sustain the people.

The folks at home continued to farm in their own familiar, comfortable ways. They read newspaper accounts of the young man's success, and his letters, and were thankful that he had found a place that 'needed' his kind of learning, for they still believed that they did not. But the people whose lives were changed by Josh Watson's work praised him for his knowledge and skill. They admitted that they owed him their very lives, and thanked God for his presence among them."¹

Yeah. Change is hard. Salvation can be hard to accept when it does not look the way we expect, or come in a package we want. Then in the process we miss out on Paradise. Jesus was dying there on the cross. Crucifixion was a punishment for traitors, and those who meant to rise up against Rome. The convicted were stripped naked, and nailed to a cross. The cross was then put up along a public road so the people passing by could gawk at the convicted's nakedness and cringe at the convicted's pain as they slowly lose the ability to

¹ John Sumwalt and Jo Perry-Sumwalt, *Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit: 62 Stories for Cycle B*, (CSS Publishing Company, Ink.: Lima, Ohio) 139-140.

support their own body weight because of the nails in their hands and feet. The crucified then asphyxiate under the pull of their chest muscles squeezing their lungs. (pause) It was horrific to say the least. On top of that Jesus had been beaten, caned, and scourged. A terrible crown of thorns had been woven and forced onto his head. (pause) Jesus, was a mess, and not the image of salvation anyone expected.

To add to Jesus' humiliation he was hung between two others who were convicted and crucified. One of the men was very much like the people in Josh Watson's home town who did not want to hear about all of those new farming techniques. They made fun of Josh the same way the first criminal makes fun of Jesus. "Let him fall on his face." That'll teach him. "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us" (v39)! The other criminal was like the people Josh Watson worked with in far off countries through the Peace Corps. Those people had also been hesitant to hear what Josh had to say, but after four years, the famine had been stopped, new sources of fresh water had been discovered, and new irrigations systems had been devised. Thanks to the introduction of new animals to their farms there were now eggs, milk and cheese. After four years the land of desperation had become a paradise.

Do y'all know what it is like to live in the land of desperation? (pause) Are any of y'all living in the land of desperation in your spiritual lives? (pause) Well take hope. The second person crucified alongside Jesus recognized this title hanging over Jesus' head, "King of the Jews," was not just a bad joke. The second criminal recognized Jesus for the gift of salvation Jesus truly is. I cannot imagine, hanging there on the cross, Jesus looked like much, and probably felt like A LOT less. However, through the power of faith, this convicted felon made an audacious request. "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power" (v42). Jesus summons the strength to make the promise, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (v43).

Jesus' promise of paradise stands today. According to acclaimed theologian N.T. Wright the 1st century Jewish perspective on paradise, "wasn't necessarily the final resting place, but the place of rest and refreshment before the gift of new life in the resurrection."² Jesus' promise is not limited to life after death. Jesus is offering forgiveness right here and right now. Forgiveness is the new farming method that brings the life of heaven to earth, and God's future to the present.

The question for us is who are we? (pause) Are we the farmers who are reluctant to try something new? (pause) Are we the criminal who made fun of Jesus on the cross? (pause) Are we the folks in those far off lands who were desperate enough to try something new so that our church might become a paradise? (pause) Are we the convicted felon on the cross who believed enough to ask that Jesus Christ would remember us when Christ comes into His kingly power? (pause) The good news is it doesn't really matter who we are. The truth is we are all of them. What matters is have we accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior? (pause) Have we accepted Jesus Christ's gift of salvation? (pause) Are we actively growing in our relationship with God? (pause) Where is the proof?

My sisters and brothers something awful happened this week. A terrible racial slur was written on the big rock in front of South Davidson high school. The same slur was written on the men's room wall at Rick's. They had to scrape the paint off the wall to remove it. Somewhere in our community those attitudes and values that say one person is somehow of less worth than another are still being taught and cherished. Let me ask y'all church, which person from our story does that sound most like? The ones that don't want to change, or the ones that found paradise? If we have accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior then our growing relationship with God is supposed to show itself in the values we teach and the ways we treat other people. The relationship shows itself in the way we stand up to those who try to justify valuing others as less. Jesus tells a convicted felon, who is an insurrectionist, a traitor, and an enemy of the state, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (v43). That's Jesus example. The only example that matters. What are we doing to build paradise in our community today? In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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² Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge: London 2001)284.