

Today's gospel contains words we'd all like to hear from God at some point – "this day you will be with me in Paradise." If that isn't good news, there's no such thing as good news. I don't know how you feel about it, but to me, it's no small comfort that the promise was made to a career criminal. If Jesus could extend salvation to someone like him, maybe there's even hope for someone like me.

Looking at the dialog between Jesus and the good thief suggests that awareness and acceptance lie at the root of that hope. The thief, fully aware in that moment of what his life had been like, accepted the truth of his situation and the truth about Jesus. Jesus in turn accepted the man with unconditional compassion and love. It seems there's a connection between awareness and acceptance; love and salvation. Let's take a closer look.

Acceptance is our full awareness and honest acknowledgement of what's happening with us, right here, right now, with no illusions. What's happening might be very good or very bad, but whatever it is, it's real. Acceptance is far more than a shrug of the shoulders or simple resignation to the inevitable. It's the ability to see ourselves as we truly are, right now. No commentary or criticism; no comparisons, excuses or judgment. Acceptance, and the awareness that necessarily precedes it, is simply being able to see and accept the truth about ourselves and our situation. With it, we can take our next steps with confident hope. Without it, we're blind. Our next steps, as the not-so-good thief amply demonstrated, can only be made with fear, anger and frustration.

Curiously, as far as acceptance is concerned, the Gospel tells us that our past is significant only insofar as it illuminates what's real right now. In the hopeful surrender of acceptance, we consent to God being God, working within us, with no instructions from us about what we think we deserve or how God should go about doing that, thank you. All things become possible, and God's unconditionally loving good will towards us can unfold as it needs to. Conversely, choosing to remain unaware leaves us only with our own will. In the absence of acceptance,

little if anything is possible – most certainly not love. Consider for a moment how rich receiving the Eucharist is when we become aware that it's the Real Presence of Jesus Christ extended to us, with us and for us in love, and also how empty a gesture it is without awareness of our own fallen nature and acceptance of God's healing, unconditional love for us anyway.

Some folks, like the not-so-good thief, don't embrace either awareness or acceptance. It may be that facing the facts is too uncomfortable. Indeed, we do have to feel safe enough and strong enough to be able to look in the mirror, but adamant refusal ever to accept the full truth about ourselves can lead us to expect, like the not-so-good thief, that God should surrender to our ways, not that we surrender to God's.

At the hospital, I spent plenty of time with folks who, like the trio on Mt. Calvary, are very near the end of life. Every one of them has had to embrace awareness of what they'd rather not have had to acknowledge, and accept that reality as best they could. Sometimes it comes easily, and at other times it's open rebellion, whether we'd call it that or not. Let me tell you a story a doctor told me one day about that.

It seemed there was a cancer patient who was giving the staff a rough time. She was impatient, demanding, rude and imperious. Everyone dreaded having to deal with her.

One day, he went in to check up on her and she fixed him with a fierce stare.

"I want you to promise me something, doctor," she hissed.

"What's that, ma'am?" he replied.

"I want you to promise that you won't let me die!" she demanded.

The doctor told me he was taken aback, but then thought it would be more cruel to lie to her than to tell her the facts directly, and as compassionately as he could.

"I can't promise you that, ma'am," he said. "No one can. You are going to die – probably very soon. I can promise you that we will do everything we can to keep you comfortable, and that you will not die alone. That's all I can do."

He expected her to start screaming at him, he told me, but she didn't. She just sank back in her pillow wordlessly. He left her room, wondering whether he had said the right thing or not.

He found out the next day, as his rounds began.

“What did you say to her?” one of the nurses asked. “She has changed so much; she actually told us she loves us and appreciates us, and even asked us to forgive her bad behavior.

Everyone says it's pleasure to care for her now!”

In that moment, the doctor told me, he realized his patient had allowed herself to become aware of the reality of her situation and accept the truth about her behavior, other peoples' feelings and so much more, including her own impending death and what that meant. Her decision to do so had changed everything. It occurred to him just then that the power of awareness, the power of acceptance and the power of love were deeply intertwined. In awareness and acceptance, all things had become possible for her, just as all things become possible to anyone who loves.

For you and me to hear those words “This day you will be with me in Paradise,” requires awareness and acceptance of the unvarnished reality of ourselves as we stand in the presence of God. It's never about flawless performance, as Luke's choice of a lifelong criminal clearly indicates. Psalm 103 explains, God knows what God has made - God has made us to be human and loves us exactly as we really are; ***not*** as our stories about who we think we are or ought to be would make us appear. Indeed, how can God love someone who doesn't really exist?

The Gospel's call to choose awareness and acceptance, confident of God's love for us, could not express a more urgent decision. Indeed, that stark decision is all that stands between any of us and being called to join Jesus in Paradise.