

“Do not presume”

The fate of the other thief

by [David S. Cunningham](#) in the [March 23, 2010](#) issue

I cut my theological teeth at a resolutely secular institution: Northwestern University, on Chicago’s suburban north shore. The university’s magnificent Alice Millar Chapel might well give the impression that it is some kind of campus centerpiece; in truth, it holds a relatively marginal place in the life of that post-Christian university. When I attended services, the chapel was usually only half full. But for those who were there, the place offered some assurance that intelligent, curious, questioning, caring Christians could actually attend the university or live nearby. That was hardly a minor matter.

The side aisles of the chapel were decorated with a series of beautifully embroidered banners, very simple in style, displaying texts that often prompted serious reflection. Some texts were from the Bible; others from classical authors; still others from modern-day saints. Most of these texts appeared without punctuation, though sometimes a geometric shape set the words into phrases.

One banner in particular always made a deep impression on me. It consisted of two sentences, set off from each other:

Do not DESPAIR one of the thieves was SAVED
Do not PRESUME one of the thieves was DAMNED

The couplet refers to the two thieves who were crucified alongside Jesus, as recorded in Luke’s Gospel: “Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 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” (Luke 23:32–33). The banner attributed the saying to St. Augustine.

The first half of this couplet requires us to insert a semicolon after the word *despair*. We are being told not to wallow in our own sin, because one of the two thieves crucified with Jesus was saved, as Luke’s Gospel attests through Jesus’ reply to him: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43).

The second half of the couplet, however, is more ambiguous. We could treat it the same way—as a command that we should not be presumptuous, because one of the thieves was damned. But I always preferred an alternative reading, taking the word *presume* as a synonym of *assume*: we should not necessarily assume that the other thief wasn’t saved as well. After all, Luke’s Gospel says nothing about the fate of the other thief. Inspired by this thought, as I remember, this notion had a certain impact on my life back then; I tried (though not always very successfully) to reserve judgment about the ultimate fate of my various enemies—even though, on my less charitable days, I felt relatively confident about their fiery destinies.

After I left Northwestern, I didn’t think about that banner or that saying for a very long time. But it suddenly reappeared to me as I was attending a production of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Early in the play, there is a darkly comic exchange between the two principal characters concerning the fate of the thieves crucified with Christ. It begins when Vladimir remarks, apropos of nothing in particular, “One of the thieves was saved.” He then goes on to comment on the probability of salvation: not actually 50-50 (one thief or the other), but one in four (or perhaps one in eight), because, as Vladimir points out, only one of the four evangelists even mentions a

saved thief. (He observes: “It’s a reasonable percentage.”)

In an interview, Beckett remarked on the inspiration for this passage: “I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe in them. There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine. I wish I could remember the Latin. It is even finer in Latin than in English. ‘Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned.’ That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters.”

So for Beckett the import of the phrase is that although we can all be thankful that we might well be saved (like the first thief), we shouldn’t let down our guard, because we might well end up damned, like the second thief.

Is this what Augustine meant? Perhaps. But if so, it is not quite in keeping with the best of his insights—and this for three reasons.

First, although Augustine was known to have assumed that the great majority of humankind would probably end up in hell, I would like to think that this was one of those cases where he let his general cultural outlook get in the way of his theology. Given that the world seemed to be going figuratively to hell in a handbasket (he lived through the fall of the Roman Empire, after all), he might be forgiven for thinking that it was going there literally as well.

Second, Augustine was elsewhere more circumspect about the human capacity to make accurate predictions about the final destiny of particular human beings. He was adamant that the church was a *corpus permixtum*—a “mixed body.” It consists of saints *and* sinners (indeed, saints who are also sinners), and not even the most discerning human eye is able to tell which ones among us have truly accepted God’s grace and which of us have refused it. And neither can we know what might happen in the future—in which the apparent holy person turns out to have been a fraud, or in which the most wicked wrongdoer suddenly turns to Christ. In fact, the story of the repentant thief is just such a case of the latter—as is Augustine’s own story, of course, as related in the *Confessions*.

Third is the most compelling reason of all: Augustine was a diligent and thoughtful reader of scripture, and there is no text in scripture that refers to the fate of the other thief. We have no scriptural basis (other than the always dangerous “argument from silence”) for pronouncing on the fate of the other thief. In fact, given the biblical story in the form we have it, a better argument can probably be made for the reading of the quotation that I gave it back in my Millar Chapel days: “Do not despair; after all, one of the thieves was saved. But do not necessarily presume that the other thief was damned.”

Given all these reflections (and my own appreciation and enthusiasm for the work of St. Augustine), I was somewhat relieved to discover that no one has been able to find this quotation in any of St. Augustine’s writings, not even in the ones that he later retracted. Some scholars have hypothesized that Beckett derived the phrase from a commentator on Augustine, who seems to have attributed something like this to him. The attribution is certainly understandable, given the relatively imprecise state of the manuscript tradition in the late Middle Ages—not to mention Augustine’s pessimistic tendencies, already noted, about the relative populations of various destinations in the afterlife. Augustine does make a few passing comments (in rather obscure places) to a “saved thief” and a “damned thief,” which suggests that this tradition of attribution was already circulating in the fourth and fifth centuries.

In any case, Augustine and his commentators were certainly not alone; the medieval period is awash in descriptions of the two thieves as examples of the saved and the damned—not least in the visual art of this era.

But why, in the clear absence of scriptural warrant, has so much of the Christian tradition assumed, and been eager to portray, one of the thieves as damned? I suspect that many of us share some degree of Beckett’s

appreciation for the shape of this saying—by which I mean the shape of the judgment-pronouncing version, the one with the semicolons. We like the balance, the dialectical reversal that’s built into it: “Don’t go too far this way. But wait—don’t go too far that way either.” We like the fact that it plants us in the safe middle ground, where we generally suspect all moral rules should plant us.

After all, didn’t Aristotle, and much of the Christian tradition that followed him, suggest that the virtues are a mean between the extremes? The right attitude toward money, for example, is to be neither a miser nor a spendthrift. The truly courageous person is neither cowardly nor reckless. The safe place is the middle ground; and in the case of the two thieves, this means avoiding the despair of imagining that we cannot be saved and the presumption of imagining that we cannot be damned.

Against this theory of the safe middle ground, however, it should be noted that, as Aristotle’s insights were taken over into Christian theology and ethics, they were often nuanced and reshaped. Although many of the Christian virtues can be seen as a means between extremes, this is not true in every case. In particular, the theological virtues—faith, hope and love—do not seem to operate in this way. What would it mean, exactly, to have “too much” faith or hope? Even if we were to speak of blind faith or of hope that is visualized through rose-colored spectacles, these would be better classified as (perhaps) a certain kind of *distortion* of these virtues, rather than a quantitative excess. And particularly in the case of love, it would seem unwise to occupy ourselves with the notion that we might be in danger of having “too much love” for one another. Jesus explicitly commends a maximization of this virtue (“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends,” John 15:13), and Paul calls it the greatest virtue (1 Cor. 13:13). Again, distortions are possible—the wrong kind of love, misdirected love and so on—but the phrase “too much Christian love” sounds like a mistake.

Whatever may be the case for us as human beings, it seems clear that God should not be labeled as loving us too much. Indeed, loving to excess seems to be exactly what God did for us (particularly in that precise moment, between the two thieves), as well as what God *does* for us every day through the manifold forms of grace that are poured out on our behalf.

At the end of Graham Greene’s novel *The Heart of the Matter*, a priest speaks to the widow of a man who has committed suicide; she knows the church’s teaching on this matter and fears for her dead husband’s eternal soul. The priest replies: “The Church knows all the rules. But it doesn’t know what goes on in a single human heart.” God knows, of course; and God is always superabundant, always in excess, never hemmed in, never straining the quality of mercy.

In some ways, we can appreciate Beckett’s enthusiasm for a nicely shaped balance of salvation and damnation. It reflects his appreciation for the shape of the phrase (in which one thief is saved and one is damned) and is illustrative of our general cultural enthusiasm for dualisms of all sorts—for either/or structures that postulate almost equally matched competitors who vie for victory. The temptation is not a new one, as ancient writers and medieval artists make plain; but our contemporary setting reinforces the idea in subtle and powerful ways. In sporting events, in political campaigns, in corporate culture—the master narrative is clear: someone wins, so the other one has to lose. Much of our artistic culture (particularly evident in film) trades on dualistic structures on a cosmic scale: heroes against villains, honesty versus corruption, good battling evil. Our church conversations often take on the same shape: the argument is polarizing; one side eventually “wins”; the other side complains bitterly, or protests permanently, or starts a new denomination.

In such circumstances, it might behoove us to remember that however entranced we might be by the shape of our dualistic accounts, this is not the shape of reality. No matter how we choose to interpret the saying about the two thieves, we know that its picture is incomplete—for on that hill, there were not two crosses, but three. In the midst of every dualism and interrupting every dichotomy, God is there. God manifests a “triangular” presence in the midst of all our efforts to set one option over against another option. While we are busy dividing up the

world into the saved and the damned, God is at work on an entirely different kind of project: reconciling the world—the *whole* world—to one another and to God's own self.

In this moment of grace, perhaps we are being reminded to loosen our very firm grasp on the twofold structures that we love so much: winning/losing, success/failure, despair/presumption. Perhaps we are being called to let go of our enthusiasm for polarizing structures, our visions of cosmic dualism, our tendency to demonize the other. Perhaps the phrase that should really rivet our attention, the phrase whose shape we should really love, would be a little less dichotomous, a little less polarized, a little more triangular: Do not despair; do not presume; and do not forget that God is full of surprises.