

WORDS FROM THE CROSS (Lenten Series)

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“Father, Forgive Them...”

Luke 23:26,33-34; Psalm 103:1-5, 8-18

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<sup>26</sup> As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus...

<sup>33</sup> When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. <sup>34</sup> Jesus said, “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*”

Let us pray.

The gospels spend significantly more time and ink on the last week of Jesus’ life, than his birth and the 30 years or so in between. While we have many wonderings about Jesus’ childhood and youth, even his young adulthood, these are largely irrelevant to the purpose for which Jesus was sent into the world. That is why the focus of the Gospels is on Jesus’ last week...and during this particular season of Lent, we shall be focusing on Jesus’ words from the cross.

You are familiar with the turn of events, and while the order of them differs slightly from Gospel to Gospel, the outcome is the same in each.

Jesus and the disciples enter Jerusalem in triumph on what we now call Palm Sunday, and celebrate Passover in Jerusalem. He has told the disciples that he will die there, but they harbor hopes of a revolutionary overthrow of the Romans and the establishment of God’s Kingdom on earth.

Instead, Judas betrays Jesus, selling out for 30 pieces of silver. Peter denies that he ever knew Jesus. He is arrested by the officials of the temple police, accompanied by the elders and the chief priests. Mocked and beaten, he is brought before the Council, then before Pilate, who sends him on to Herod.

No one can make any real charges stick, because Jesus is innocent. Yet Jesus is treated with contempt, and beaten repeatedly. Neither Pilate nor Herod can find him guilty of anything and so they plan to release him, however the crowd demands that Jesus be crucified.

Ultimately Jesus is led away to Golgotha, the “place of the skull” where executions take place. It is here – on the cross – where we shall –between now and Palm Sunday – position ourselves in order to listen to the last words of Jesus.

Crucifixion is perhaps the most inhumane form of torture and death ever devised by humanity. (If you have seen Mel Gibson’s movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, no gory detail was spared.) It is a slow, agonizing, humiliating way to die. During the several hours that Jesus hung on the cross, he somehow had the energy and the presence of mind, to speak. Given the circumstances, I would suggest that we give particular attention to these final messages of Jesus’ “Words from the Cross”.

***“Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing.”***

Given the excruciating pain and stress on the body, no doubt if one speaks at all, it will be with an economy of words.

Jesus’ first words? A prayer, addressed to God the Father.

We believe in the mystery of the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and God has numerous names in scripture—yet Jesus always addresses God as “Father”.

As the nails pierce his hands and feet, Jesus addresses his heavenly Father.

“Father, Forgive...”

Jesus—who was innocent—who had every right to recriminations, to demand justice—yet instead he calls upon his father, to forgive. Jesus—who is both human and divine, relies upon his Father to forgive those who are responsible for taking his life.

This week in the Florida school shooting, families are put in the horrendous position of needing to forgive one who robbed them of the life of a loved one—a son/daughter, husband/father. While we are grateful for the heroic actions of those who shielded others from bullets, it is impossible to totally comprehend the loss of innocent lives.

One cannot be too quick to forgive...one will never forget. Yet how does one forgive even lesser “crimes” or hurts that others have inflicted upon us?

I can speak from experience here...for on a clear, sunny fall afternoon a fatal automobile accident claimed the life of my mother. The 21 year old driver of a three axel delivery truck, claimed he did not see her car. By sideswiping it, on a busy freeway, it spun out of control, crossed two lanes of traffic and ended up against a guard rail. She died at the scene.

The county District Attorney pressed charges of vehicular manslaughter against that driver.

Not a high profile case, there were many delays. Two and a half years later, during Holy Week of 2004, the case came to trial. I’d had considerable time to grieve...time to process the roller coaster of emotions, time to allow God’s spirit to work on mine. I knew that no matter the outcome of the trial, I needed to forgive Randall Ruby. He was acquitted by a jury of his peers.

My father, then divorced from my mother for decades, had carefully followed these developments. Eager to hear the outcome, I phoned him. He was outraged at what he perceived as a miscarriage of justice. “Lynell, how can you be so calm?”

I had only one response: “Dad, this is Holy Week. There was once another trial, and an innocent man died for you and for me. That is why I can forgive, because I have been forgiven.”

Anne Lamott says “to withhold forgiveness is like swallowing battery acid and then wondering why the other person doesn’t die.” When we forgive, two people are set free—the forgiver and the forgiven!

Jesus prays: “Father, forgive them. They don’t know what they are doing.”

Surely this was true in the immediate context: Those who crucified Jesus did not grasp his true identity as the Son of God.

However it is true of us as well. We make choices often without thought for the consequences which will follow. We are clueless. We do not get it. Or we think the “rules” don’t apply to us.

But the good news is this:

God’s grace is greater than all our sin.

In my humanness, I’d curse my captors, or I’d call upon God to do so. Not Jesus.

Jesus asks: “Father, forgive them...”

For whom does Jesus pray?

“Them”—certainly constitutes the Roman guards who are only doing their job, carrying out orders. “Father forgive them” surely includes those who were complicit in this miscarriage of justice; it includes the crowds who shouted, “Crucify him!”, the Roman and Jewish authorities, Judas who betrayed Jesus, and the rest of the disciples who deserted him.

“Father, forgive them” most certainly applies to and includes each of us.

While not physically present at the cross, we are aware that our own failures and frailties, our faults and our sins were nailed on the cross with Jesus.

“Father, forgive them” surely applies to the shooter at the high school in Parkland, Florida on Wednesday. I will never forget the anguish filled faces of two mothers embracing. On the forehead of the one facing the camera, was an ashen cross. A reminder that we are dust and to dust we shall return.

It is indeed, at the cross, where we come face to face not only with the Savior,  
but our own mortality, our own sin and our need for forgiveness,  
with the costliness of God’s grace  
and with the lavishness of God’s love.

On the cross, Jesus’ thoughts first and foremost are for you and for me. On his lips? A request of God the Father, to forgive us.

Who among us wants to forgive the killers of our loved one(s), let alone is able to do so? But Jesus knows the heart of the Father is the heart of a forgiver.

No doubt Jesus is familiar with the Psalm read for us this morning, the psalm which recounts God’s incessant, relentless resolve to heal the world:

Psalm 103:2-5

<sup>2</sup> Praise the LORD, my soul,  
and forget not all his benefits—  
<sup>3</sup> who forgives all your sins  
and heals all your diseases,  
<sup>4</sup> who redeems your life from the pit  
and crowns you with love and compassion,  
<sup>5</sup> who satisfies your desires with good things  
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.

This is what God the Father does: forgive, heal, redeem! All of these are synonymous with the character of God, and God’s desire to bring healing to the brokenness of our world--our relationships with one another as well as with God-self.

The Psalmist expresses confidence in God who...

v.9 ... will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever;  
<sup>10</sup> he does not treat us as our sins deserve  
or repay us according to our iniquities.  
<sup>11</sup> For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
so great is his love for those who fear him;  
<sup>12</sup> as far as the east is from the west,  
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

<sup>13</sup>As a father has compassion on his children,  
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;  
<sup>14</sup>for he knows how we are formed,  
he remembers that we are dust.

God is in the business of forgiveness. This is what God does. This is who God is.

Atonement is the theological word that describes what was happening on the cross: "...that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them." 2 Corinthians 5:19.

Another way of thinking of "atonement" is "at-one-ment".

"What was separated by an abyss of wrong has been reconciled by an act of perfect love..."

"Here at the cross our eyes are fixed on the [one] who is the Lord of Life. We look at the One who is everything that we are and everything that we are not, the One who is true man and true God. In Christ, God and humanity, are perfectly one. At-one-ment. Here, through the cross we have come home—to the truth about ourselves, home to the truth about what God has done about what we have done." (p. 34, Richard John Neuhaus, Death On Friday Afternoon)

The drama of Good Friday is answered by this prayer of generosity from the heart of Jesus. The lives of those present and our lives are forever changed by the self-giving of Jesus and the lavish love of the Father. The pattern of death is broken in Sunday's answer to Jesus' prayer for us on Friday.

"And now we know, or begin to know, why this awful, awe-filled Friday is called good." (p.34, RJN)