

“Father, forgive them...”

From the series: A True Story: The Gospel and Forgiveness

Text: Luke 23:34

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"A True Story: The Gospel and Forgiveness," has been our Lenten theme this season. The story is the story written by Simon Wiesenthal reflecting his own experience in the Nazi concentration camp, being pulled aside at one point and taken into the room of a dying Nazi officer who poured out his confession, his terrible atrocity that he had perpetrated as one of the SS troops, burning alive a village of Jews, a horrible story, pleading to this one token Jew, as it were, to forgive him. Wiesenthal listened to the story, sat almost paralyzed, then he rose and left without saying a word, and the little book, *The Sunflower*, that he writes, concludes with the question, not an answer, but with the question, "What would you have done?"

That's where we began a few weeks ago and tonight we bring our reflections on that question to a conclusion. Probably not to a conclusion in terms of being finished with it, but at least for these Wednesday night considerations.

The matter of forgiveness is much more complex than I had ever been aware, which may sound very strange because it would seem that being in the ministry almost 40 years now, would not forgiveness be the stuff that I have dealt with every day? In thought and reflection and in relationships, preaching and teaching, forgiveness - it seems like it is the most obvious commodity with which we in the church have to do. And yet, I think that in these weeks I have thought about it at a level at which I have never thought about it before, and it's a much more complex matter than I ever realized. That's why I began with the question a few weeks ago, "Is it possible, is it moral?"

The Jewish traditions say I cannot forgive you for something that you've done to another. I can only forgive you for what you've done to me. It is very easy for us, with our Gospel of grace, to move into cheap grace and cheap grace would fail to take seriously the plight of the victim. It would devalue the victim and tend simply to shove everything under the rug. It's very easy to do that. We have seen that actions and attitudes do have their consequences.

Forgiveness does not rule out the consequence of what we have done. There is a harvest at the end of our days and, in the meantime, as well. And yet, forgiveness certainly must be possible, for we are in a dead-end situation of unrelieved darkness, but it is a complex matter, and I wonder if the fact that I hadn't really ever wrestled with the nature of forgiveness or what was involved or its possibility is not because I was raised, as I suppose most of you were, with a very traditional idea of the atoning death of Jesus Christ as the place where forgiveness was procured for us. Are you with me? God is holy; we have sinned. We cannot do anything about our situation, for we daily increase our debt. Does that sound like catechism? And consequently, if anything were to be done for us to deliver us from the weight of our sin, it would have to be by another. God provided another. Jesus came to die for our sins. He bore our sins away, thereby making possible forgiveness. That's the way you learned it, isn't it?

And there's something powerful about that image and when I speak about it tonight, I don't want you to hear caricature. I hope I won't caricature nor ridicule. I simply want you to know that, as I'm thinking about that and it's not just in this Lenten season but in these more recent years, I've come to recognize that that image falls short, and I think it falls short here - that atoning death of Jesus that took away our sin and created the possibility for God to forgive us in the traditional understanding, that was a transaction that happened *apart* from us. Martin Luther was so strong at that point. It happened apart from us, on our behalf, and it had a very objective element about it. There was a debt to be settled, a score to be settled, and to use the phrase of another Lutheran writer, Jesus took the rap for us, and that happens in the evangelical and orthodox presentation of atonement theory, that happens apart from us.

There's an old hymn, "'Tis done, 'tis done, the great transaction's done," and that imagery has been repeated in the old hymns and in our liturgies. The Reformed Church liturgy of many, many years had this statement, "He was forsaken by God that we need never be forsaken."

"Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain, he washed it white as snow."

"There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel's veins and sinners plunged beneath that flood loose all their guilty stains."

Something happened between God and Jesus objectively, out there, on my behalf, quite apart from any engagement by me. That's a rather powerful imagery and one can see what was going on. Our debt, our sins transferred to another who suffered the wrath of God on our behalf in order that we might be set free, forgiven.

Now, I'm suggesting that I never really wrestled with forgiveness that much because that was all so matter-of-fact and taken for granted, and so what's the big deal? Well, that's not quite fair, because it was a big deal. Some of us might have

sung some of those old hymns with tears in our eyes. There was a deep emotional engagement with that idea because there was this gracious act of God in that God supplied the one who took the rap for us.

But, think about it for a moment: In that conception of things, there is no forgiveness. That is not forgiveness. God got God's pound of flesh. Someone took the rap for us. The penalty due was meted out. God didn't forgive anything, which means that even God is subject to a moral absolute. Even God couldn't simply say, "I forgive you." God had to arrange this elaborate structure of substitutionary atonement because the absolute, the moral absolute, the law is even above God, and it will be satisfied by God. And so, if God would embrace us and take us home, God has some dealing to do.

But, once again, this is quite apart from anything really happening in my being. Do you hear me? You could learn this stuff in the catechism. You might on occasion even be moved at the thought that there was a love of God that provided that elaborate institution by which God could now embrace us, but God had a problem and God had to deal with it and so, as a matter of fact, there was no forgiveness. God can't forgive, obviously. I think that that old, traditional imagery which we took for granted, had been spoon-fed from childhood up, showed us the formula by which to receive our reprieve without it ever necessarily touching us or changing us.

Now, I want to suggest that that image of God has been called in question here, that image of God sitting on a super throne, that moral governor of the universe out there, apart from us, setting up these respective transactions. Haven't we been more inclined to seek God as an Ultimate Mystery flowing out into the whole cosmic drama, this 15 billion year adventure on which we are, beginning with whatever Big Bang was with the coalescing of matter, the emergence of inanimate matter, then animate matter, life, and then conscious life, and then human being, and then human history, human culture, that trajectory on which we are ourselves as we speak? And if God is that Ultimate Mystery Whose Spirit is the enlivening, energizing, creative force moving through all that is, pushing, nudging, driving toward human humanity, humanization, then it is not as though some governor outside created us perfect, we falling, therefore taking upon ourselves the guilt for violating the law of the universe that even was above the governor, and that whole thing had to be somehow figured, but rather, we are in an emerging mode and we are still so much animal struggling for survival, clawing our way from the jungle, emerging out of the slime, moving toward human community, here and there, now and again it breaks forth, but it's constantly driven back. We find ourselves moving in a humane fashion, only to find all of the old stuff in us rising up now and again.

And it seems to me that the God of this process is not about satisfying some moral absolute that even holds God hostage, who needs some sacrifice, some satisfaction, but rather, a God who keeps pushing us, pushing us along, waiting

for us patiently, a God who is not into punishment, not into retribution, for what is punishment, what is retribution in terms of where this thing is going? We bring upon ourselves our punishment. Certainly in the ordering of society it is necessary for law and order and all of that. That's another whole complex thing. But, I'm thinking about the soul of the universe now. I'm thinking about where it's all going; I'm thinking about that creative Spirit that's pushing toward ultimate world community, ultimate humane existence, ultimate humanization and whatever other levels of being there may be beyond us.

It seems to me that our new image of God might suggest, as the Psalmist suggests, that with that God there is forgiveness, not having to satisfy some external moral absolute out here, but with that God there is forgiveness and the image even more powerful of Jesus of the prodigal son who comes home, not to receive recrimination and condemnation and retribution, but the embrace of the father. And I come, finally, to my test. There's Jesus dying who says, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." The most powerful, evocative emblem of the whole life and work of Jesus is in those words. "Father, forgive them." Just simply forgive them. Let it go, please. Because they don't know what they are doing.

Oh, they *knew* what they were doing; they knew good and well what they were doing. They knew as well what they were doing as Slobodan Milosevic knows what he's doing, and our Administration and our Defense Department and our military know what they're doing in these hours. They knew what they were doing in the short run. They were maintaining power and position and prestige and the status quo and business as usual and conventional wisdom. They knew what they were doing, in the short run.

They didn't know what they were doing in terms of this 15 billion year process that we've come to understand. They didn't know what they were doing in terms of God's intention and purpose, moving toward fuller humanization. They didn't understand. They were blocking, they were hindering, they were throwing up barriers against where the Spirit would go with this whole thing of which we are a part. So, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, because they don't understand."

Now, there he is, true God, true human. There you see it. There you see the heart of the Divine. There you see the intention of the human. And it seems to me that when we are encountered with that kind of spirit reflective of the divine Spirit, but incarnate in the human, our defenses are defeated. What happens when you are as guilty as hell and you face the one you have offended and you're all ready to marshal your arguments, make your denials, line up your excuses, rationalize your behavior, and you meet grace and forgiveness. All of that which you have gotten ready with which to carry on a defense of your life project melts, and you begin to weep and there is a contrition that cannot be contrived that rushes to the surface, and you say, "Oh, my God." Then there's a moment of self-awareness, a

moment of honesty. There is then in the presence of such grace the capacity to own my story as my story, and then I'm forgiven.

References:

Simon Wiesenthal. *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. Shoken, revised, expanded edition, 1998.