

“Father, Forgive Them”

From the series: The Seven Last Words of Christ

Text: Luke 23:32-38

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

For the Sundays of Lent our meditation will be on the seven words from the cross, the seven words uttered by Jesus in the time of his crucifixion. No one Gospel has all seven words. The most that any one Gospel has are three words. You have to take all four Gospels in order to come up with seven utterances from the cross. Mark's Gospel, the earliest Gospel, has only the groan, "My God, my God, why?" In these Lenten weeks, with these familiar utterances before us, let us think about them not so much as words that Jesus spoke, as though there were some scribe with a dictating pad down at the foot of the cross. Let us understand them as they probably were intended, that is, as the windows through which the respective Gospel writers were finding meaning in the death of Jesus. Those seven words, which appear collectively in the four Gospels, give us a window. We can look through that window with the respective evangelists to sense what they sensed was going on and, thereby, hopefully to find for ourselves renewed meaning, as once again we contemplate the crucified one.

The first word, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do," is an amazing utterance in the context of the paragraph in which it appears. We have the leaders scoffing at Jesus, the crowd mocking Jesus, the soldiers making sport of Jesus. In the midst of the excruciating pain and anguish of crucifixion, the cruelest blow that could be delivered in that ancient world, Jesus had the grace and the compassion to pray, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they are doing." That statement really is like a concise creed of Christian faith. For therein we find a word about ourselves, and we find a word about God, and we find a word addressed to us as well, giving us a way to live.

It is a word about us. Jesus said, "Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." And we don't know what we are doing most of the time, do we? It wasn't a matter of whether they were educated or uneducated, whether they were intelligent or lacking in intelligence. It wasn't a matter of that kind of knowing. It was that totality of their being and the totality of our humankind that simply drifts into all kinds of circumstances and situations that lead to brokenness and

hurt and pain and tragedy. Most of the time we don't mean it. We don't intend it. We get caught up in it. And there is a kind of solidarity about humankind, so when Jesus prayed that prayer I think he had in mind not only those gathered at the foot of the cross, the soldiers, the religious leaders, and a few scattered followers. He had in mind those to be sure, but he had in mind really the whole body of humankind — all of us as well. For it is true of us so much of the time — we just don't know the implications and the consequences. We get caught up in the solidarity of the human situation. And Jesus holding us not in contempt is the beautiful thing about Jesus. He never held a person in contempt nor did he hold us all together in contempt, but rather with deep grace — amazing grace — said, "Father, forgive them. Because they don't know what they are doing." And we don't, do we?

Some time this evening the deadline will be reached for whether or not the guns have been pulled out of Sarajevo or whether the air strikes will commence. That tragic war has been going on for nearly two years, and we have watched it night after night — the misery, the anguish, old women weeping over graves, parents grasping bleeding children, bodies blown apart. And we say to ourselves, "What in the world is going on? What are those people thinking of? Ethnic cleansing. All of the tragedy of that situation in the former Yugoslavia and we don't know what to do about it. A friend of mine preached a year ago, saying (and he's had a good deal of experience in terms of international affairs) that the judgment of history will be harsh for not doing something. Others have said we stand by in this century and watch the horror of the Holocaust, and now we're sitting by again. But, as a matter of fact, what do you do? A civil war, a civil conflict, ethnic rivalries, blood feuds, what do you do? What do you do if you are a world leader? What do you do if you are a politician? We haven't known what to do. Voices have been raised, but the risks are there too and the stakes are high. It took the explosion of a shell in a market place, killing over 60 people, that finally galvanized public opinion and gave the administration, I suppose, the green light to move and to gather the NATO forces and to come to some decision to act, at least to lay down an ultimatum.

I suspect that Pilate gathered his national security council around him also as Passover was approaching, and the possibility of this Nazarene coming to town was discussed. What were they to do? Ah, Pilate doesn't come off very well — washing his hands as though he could absolve himself from this whole thing. He couldn't absolve himself, but what should he have done? I imagine they went back and forth with hot debate. What does a politician do, having to test the winds because another election is coming? Does one act according to one's conviction, or is it true of the politician as it is true of all of us that our personal ambitions and our personal motivations and our own egos and our own pride get so wound up and so involved with our desire to serve the public good and to do what is right that it is hard to separate them? What does one do? We don't know, often we simply don't know. Jesus said, "Father forgive them. They just don't know. They don't know what they are doing."

Can you imagine the discussion in the Sanhedrin cloakroom on Good Friday afternoon when Annas and Caiaphas conferred about the fact that now the deed was done? It would not have been difficult for them to rationalize everything that was done for the well being of the people, for the peace and tranquility of the city, for the accommodation of the Roman occupier. It wasn't easy, folks. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them. They really don't know. It's not that they aren't intelligent. It's not that they are not responsible. It's not that they're not guilty. It's not that they will not have to live with the implications of their actions. But, really, forgive them. Forgive them!" Jesus didn't stand in contempt of humankind in the ambiguity of our situation, but with deep compassion and deep insight said, "The only thing that can do anything is Your grace, O God. Forgive them."

One of the advantages of vacation time is I can read books in the daylight and go to movies at night. *In the Name of the Father* is a powerful film taking place in about 1974, about some early bombings of the IRA. London, England is upset. A young Irishman is arrested with his friends. The evidence is rigged. There is police brutality and coercion such that one is disillusioned. One is disillusioned who has such a respect for the grand British tradition of law and of rectitude, one who has a vision of British police as the London Bobby without a gun, with nightstick, tipping his hat. Here was coercion. Here was a keeping away of evidence. This was a skewing of the system because the English were nervous, because there was terrorism in their land, in their city. Something had to be done. Someone had to be nailed. Someone had to be arrested. Someone had to be proven guilty in order that the people would feel secure again.

And that British system of law and justice, that wonderful system, these remarkably dignified people with their wigs and all, held people in prison for fifteen years for a crime they hadn't done when they knew they hadn't done the crime. You don't want to believe it can happen. But you sense the pressure they were under to make it right. They didn't know what they were doing. They did know what they were doing, but they didn't know what they were doing because we are constantly caught in that kind of bifurcation to do what is right, or to survive.

Schindler's List, a powerful film that must be on your list, shows the Holocaust in all of its horror. The most dastardly deed in human history, in this century. Not a film without hope, however. Schindler, a swash-buckling reckless, hard drinking, woman-chasing exploiter of other human beings, going to the Krakow Ghetto during the Nazi occupation to exploit the vulnerability of the Jews, to get their money in order to establish a factory, to hire them cheaply in order for him to make a fortune — pure and simple. He was clear about that. But he ends up beginning to see these people as people, begins to use his considerable fortune to bribe the system and get around that awful Nazi horror in order to save little children and old people and those in between. His list is those ostensibly working in his factory. But Schindler, this swash-buckling, kind of careless German becoming human, has had his own heart broken with compassion. Schindler is I,

and I am Schindler, the light and the shadow that are always coexistent within me. Jesus knew it, and Jesus did not hold me in contempt, nor did he hold Schindler in contempt. But Jesus said, “Father forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing.”

Ah, there’s a word about us here. I grow so angry with people. I get disgusted. I get impatient. I despise gutless leadership full of guile. I criticize and I judge, and when I do that I set myself apart as though I am not in complicity with the whole human scene. But you see, I can’t do that. I am in solidarity with it all; the light and the shadow run through my heart too. I am a part of the picture, so it is not a question of whether I can stand apart and judge. It is rather the fact that with you I stand before the cross and hear Jesus say of me and of you, “You just don’t know.” What grace! What insight! What empathy! What compassion for us, such as we are.

And it’s a word about God. “Father, forgive.” It’s a word about God. It’s a prayer that issued from Jesus’ deepest, most profound sense of who God was. “Father, forgive.” In the intimate connection, that *Abba* relationship, relationship of parent and child, that intimate connection of Jesus and Father. Divine parent. “Loving God, forgive.” It is what he taught. He was living out simply what he taught, for in the Sermon on the Mount he said, “Be children of your heavenly father. Love your enemies. The sun shines on the just and the unjust. The rain falls on the good and the evil. Your heavenly father embraces the whole human family and graces them all together. Be children of your heavenly father. Love your enemies.” It was the God he pictured so beautifully in the story of the Prodigal Son, which is really the story of a prodigal father, a father’s love. The son coming home, humiliated, with his speech well rehearsed, ready to make a plea to be put up in the bunk house and finding himself rather overwhelmed by the father’s love, drenched in the father’s tears, embraced in the father’s bosom. Jesus, knowing God as Jesus knew God, said, “Forgive them,” because he knew that forgiveness is God’s thing.

Forgiveness is God’s thing. You notice what’s not here? There’s not the slightest hint here in this word from the cross that Jesus was somehow or other standing between an angry God and a sinning people. There’s not a word of that in this word. In fact, I will be pointing out throughout the season of Lent that if we had only the four Gospels, which seem to me would be enough— if we had only the four Gospels, if only we had these seven words by which to interpret the cross — there would be not the slightest hint that that one whom Jesus addressed was full of wrath, ready to strike. There’s not a word of that. It is rather out of our tradition, coming from Anselm, the archbishop of Canterbury in the 11th century, that the idea comes that there is some kind of inexorable law that needs to be satisfied and that God could not be just and forgive unless God exacted the pound of flesh and that inexorable law was satisfied. Not a word of that here. Just — “There is forgiveness with Thee,” as the Psalmist said. “Father, forgive them.” Ah, it’s a word about God. God is like that.

And it is a word for you and for me, for Jesus has given us an example that we might live as he lived, being forgiven so that we might forgive one another, being love that we might love one another, being the recipients of amazing grace that we might be gracious one to another. The model of Jesus, the life he lived, the grace he conveyed, if only we could do it, would change the world, the only thing that would change the world.

Being lived out before us these days in the Olympic Games is the drama of Nancy Carrigan and Tanya Harding. I would love to have five minutes with each of those young ladies, individually. I would like to say to Nancy Carrigan, “Nancy, if you want to have freedom, if you want to skate as a swan with grace and delight, then although I don’t know the horror of that experience, let it go and forgive whoever is guilty. Let it go so that your heart will not be alienated and your mind filled with fear. Let it go. Pray Jesus’ prayer, ‘Father, forgive; because certainly they didn’t know what they were doing.’ Oh yes, they did know what they were doing, but they didn’t know what they were doing.” Have you ever been caught in something like that? And I would say to Tanya, “I don’t know if you are guilty or not. If you’re not guilty, God give you grace and courage. But if you are guilty, God forgive you.” And I would hug her. That girl needs a hug. Doesn’t she need someone to love her and to tell her that she too is lovely?

And, that’s just two people whom the media have lifted high before our view, but in those two the paradigm of Bosnia, and of East and West, and of the whole world. The world would be changed if we could do just two things, if we could hear the prayer and know it is for us, and be forgiven. The last bastion of pride is the resistance to the word, “I forgive you.” Then, if we could forgive one another it would change the world.