

The God Who Forgives

From the series: The Faith Of Jesus; Trust in a Gracious God

Text: Psalm 130:4; Luke 23:34

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

But there is forgiveness with you.... Psalm 130:4

"Father, forgive them...." Luke 23:34

Jesus died the way he died because he lived the way he lived, and he lived as he lived because of that which he believed in. The faith of Jesus - that's what we have been trying to get at these weeks. What did Jesus believe? That is an important question because what he believed shaped how he lived, and how he lived issued in the way he died. So to understand his death we need to know what he believed.

We've been saying that at the heart of it was a belief in the nearness of God. Trust in a gracious God. Or, for today, trust in a God who forgives us. Sometimes, in the Christian Church, we tend to think that we have a monopoly on forgiveness. It is not so. I have been trying to say in these weeks that Jesus lived out his Jewish faith, and it was as a believing *Jew* that Jesus believed in the God who forgives. Jesus is sometimes claimed by us as the first Christian and that is not true. He was a believing *Jew*. And if he believed in the God who forgives, then it is because in his own Jewishness, Yahweh, the God of Covenant, was a God of grace. We do a great injustice if we think of the Old Testament as being over against the New Testament. In fact, even that terminology is a put-down for Israel. For it is not as though there was an old covenant, and then a new covenant, as though there are two covenants. There is only *one* covenant of grace. There was its form in Israel, and its form in Jesus.

To be sure, Jeremiah, speaking to Judah in a time of its own rebellion said that a time would come when God would make a new covenant. But it is the same covenant. It is new in the same sense as we speak of the new moon - the new moon that has appeared recently this week in a small sliver. It's not a new moon at all; it is the new appearance of the old moon, the same old moon. Thank God! Israel knew that God is a God who forgives and probably nowhere does that come to better expression than in the Psalmist, the Psalter hymnbook of the Old Testament, particularly in the seven Psalms, the group Psalms 32, 51, 102, and

130, as we had it this morning. There we find this marvelous statement. "There is forgiveness with Thee," the Psalmist cries out of the depths. The depths are the chaos, the watery chaos, the chaos that always threatens the world and humankind, and one, in whatever experience he may have been in, feels the foundations shaking, and he is being sucked down. He cries, "Out of the depths. Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my cry. Let your ears be attentive to the supplications." And then, conceding his guilt, making no rationalization, no parade of excuses, he simply says, "Lord, if you should mark iniquity, who could stand?" Lord, if you kept books, who of us could stand? But then this amazing, wonderful Gospel declaration, "But with you there is forgiveness."

Jesus lived that way. That's what he believed. And we can tell, because that's the way he acted. He was one who, going through Jericho one day, picked out the leading entrepreneur, the wealthiest man in town, the one who had gotten the franchises on the tax-farm system, Zaccheus, by name. He may have been short, but he was big. And he was curious, for whatever reason we don't know. Maybe just curious. Maybe some hankering need, some unfulfilled yearning that all of the taxes that he could skim off could never satisfy. Jesus said, "Come down. I want to dine with you today." And in that story we have what we've been talking about all these weeks. The table fellowship of Jesus. He sat down at table. He sat down at table and thereby mediated the grace of God. He said to Zaccheus, "I'm going to your house today," thereby indicating an acceptance that amazed Zaccheus. It's a lucky thing that he didn't fall out of the tree. "I'm going to your house today. I'm going to sit at your table today. I'm going to be in solidarity with you today. I'm going to speak the grace and the forgiveness by my very presence in breaking bread with you today."

Luke probably adds the story recorded in the 8th verse that tells us about Zaccheus' amazing response to this amazing grace. Zaccheus claims that he is going to make restitution far beyond the law would require, but Luke probably adds that verse 8 - it was a story without that verse at one point, but Luke uses the story as a paradigm, as a model which shows the results of conversion. But if you just take out the fact that he was going to make all this restitution, read the story without verse 8, then you will find Jesus at his table gracing Zaccheus with his presence and saying, "Today salvation is come." If you put verse 8 in there, the thing that tends to happen to us is that we tend to see Zaccheus making restitution and then Jesus saying, "Today salvation has come," as though it is salvation that has come in the wake of the restitution that has been made. But that is not so. Jesus simply embraces this man, and it is in the embrace that this man is transformed.

Grace always grants the acceptance, and whatever follows is a consequence of the initiative of the grace of God. It is the announcement of forgiveness that is the catalyst of repentance and penitence. And in the church, and in religion in general, all sorts of religions, that's what we never keep straight. Somehow or

other when we get organized, and we get institutionalized, and we get our prescriptions and our formulas, and we have our way in and our processes and our structures, then it becomes a matter of believing certain things or doing certain things, behaving a certain way, making a certain response, on the basis of which we are embraced. That is simply the way of religion - all religions, because as Walter Brueggemann says in his commentary on Psalm 130, "This premature announcement of forgiveness scandalizes all of our calculating religion."

I wonder, is that enough? The story from the instance of the Psalmist, the story of Zaccheus, and I could add the stories of the prodigal son or the Publican and the Pharisee or I could multiply the stories of Jesus, but in the Zaccheus story is what we have been talking about - the God of the abandoned, the God of the outcast, the God of the excluded. Jesus undercutting the religious institutions, the institutional forms. I don't think he had anything against religious forms, as long as they were recognized as the medium through which the presence of God and the grace of God came. But not as absolutes. Not as though, somehow or other, the organized religion, or church, or temple, or the mosque held the spigot which could turn on and off the grace of God. No! No, Jesus spoke of an immediacy of the forgiveness of God, announced ahead of time, before there was any evidence of faith or repentance, or penitence. And I wonder, is that enough?

A couple of weeks ago on Wednesday night I raised the question about whether or not "That's Enough?" Is it enough just to say, "I forgive you?" God knows that there is something in us that disallows that, calls for something more. I think there's something primal in us that wants something more. I think it is true of all religions. Religions speak about appeasing God, or expiating God, or atonement. Religions have a means by which to put people back into communion with God, and there is always a sacrifice or an offering, or a price to pay. There is, it seems in religion, be it Islamic, Jewish, Christian, some bookkeeping that has to go on. God can't simply forgive. I think there is something in us that demands that, because we structure our religions with that same "tit for tat." Paul uses the image of the Roman law court. This is his metaphor, at least one of his metaphors. He has more than one for the atonement, but essentially, Paul's metaphor claims that Jesus "takes the rap" for us, so that there isn't really forgiveness pure and simple. Something has been paid. *Someone* has paid. Is that important? Is that necessary? There must be something in us that senses that that must be necessary. That's the way we operate. I mean, you can't run a world on any other basis, can you?

But look at our world. Last night on the NBC News there were two clips about the escalating violence, the IRA, the bombings, the capricious bombings in England. A three year old killed and then a twelve year old killed. There was a funeral yesterday, and services being called in Ireland out of deep concern, and the Protestant extremists in northern Ireland not having anything really to do with Protestantism, but they killed four Catholics again, gunned them down, dead. You see the terror on the faces of the people. Then the clip from Israel where the

Palestinian issue escalates, the violence is greater, stabbings, shootings, a young man named Martin Fletcher, I think, who goes to the store and buys his pistol and takes some target practice, hating to do it and yet feeling he must do it. This terrible thing going on in Bosnia Herzegovina, the genocide where as a military strategy the soldiers rape and impregnate the Muslim women. Dehumanizing. Terrible things! Do you just say, "You are forgiven?"

But, you see, what's going on in our world is the festering, and the festering again of ancient feuds, and old, old hurts that will not be let go of. It's true in Bosnia. It's true in the Balkans - what is going on is a result of ethnic pain out of the past. It's true in Ireland. It's not just Catholic/Protestant. It's deep wounds in the culture, centuries back, continuing to come between because there is something primal in us, I am sure, that demands retribution and vengeance and retaliation. Where retribution and retaliation and vengeance operate, there is no end! It never ends!

So, I wonder. I ask this question. You think about it with me. Was God with Jesus on the cross just dying? Was Jesus' breakthrough the thing he was reaching for, was that what got him killed? The fact that he undercut the religion tit-for-tat and the neat bookkeeping of people in mosque and church. Was he crucified because he tried to say, "Retribution, vengeance, retaliation, tit-for-tat will not work? There is only one way to break through, through this accursed human plague, and that is to take it on the chin?" I wonder.

Jürgen Moltman, in his book, *The Crucified God*, claims that God does not need a blood sacrifice to forgive us. I think he needs to show us that that won't work. It is only *love* that becomes the transformative catalyst that changes people. It is only if I can forgive you *before* you say, "I am sorry." It is only if I can enwrap you in my arms while you are still alienated that something happens inside out. I wonder if God, in Christ, was taking it on the chin? And all the darkness, and all the atrocity, and all of the horror of the human story crashing in upon God, in Christ, on the cross, and God absorbing it all, just absorbing it all. Then hearing Jesus who lived out his faith in concrete action and died saying, "Father, forgive them." I suspect if that won't do the trick nothing will.

And I suspect that Easter is the sign that that love may be crucified, but never finally defeated, and that finally, either here or there, God won't quit until we get the picture.