

FORGIVE THEM
an Ash Wednesday sermon by Dr. David Palmer, March 1 2017
United Methodist Church of Kent
Based on Luke 23:32-34

We are currently in the midst of a sermon series entitled, “The Points of the Cross—How the Cross of Christ Can Save You.” One way to discern the meaning of the cross is to look at the words that Jesus spoke from the cross. We noted several of those words this past Sunday. When Jesus said, “I thirst,” it was an indication of how Jesus, on the cross, has identified with our human condition. He experienced our weakness, our lack, our pain. At the same time, when he said, “It is finished,” or “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit,” these statements expressed how he was offering himself to God—not simply that he was entrusting himself personally to God, but that he was offering his life on the cross on behalf of all humanity, as a perfect offering to God, to offset all of our human sin, so that we might be accepted into the presence of God.

There are seven statements that Jesus made from the cross altogether, and it is quite notable which statement was first. What are the very first words that Jesus spoke from the cross? “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

This is stunning. Jesus was subjected to extraordinary abuse, derision and extreme pain, and the first words to come out of his mouth are “Father, forgive them”? This sets the tone and clearly establishes what Jesus is doing on the cross. He has come to bring forgiveness for even the worst sin, for even the most hardened human hearts. Jesus forgives his enemies. He forgives his tormentors. He forgives also his friends who had abandoned him. If Jesus can utter such a word of forgiveness from the cross, it proves that God’s forgiveness is without limit.

But what exactly was meant by the second part of Jesus' statement, where he said, “for they know not what they do”? Perhaps Jesus means by this that they do not know that they are crucifying the Son of God. But otherwise they certainly do know what they are doing. The soldiers know that they are killing a man with the utmost brutality. The temple leaders know that they are presiding over an injustice for the sake of political expediency. The disciples who are mostly absent from the cross know that they are distancing themselves from Jesus to save their own skin. Jesus is not excusing their action by suggesting that this is all some sort of mistake, for which the actors are not really culpable. But Jesus is acknowledging our human condition—that we so easily go through life not really knowing what we are doing. We fail to be attentive to God, we hurt other people, we let our own self-centered concerns get in the way, we make bad choices, we get caught up in the crowd; and we do all this partly out of willful disobedience but also out a spiritual ignorance, in which we are just not in tune with God. Jesus looks out from the cross onto the whole tangled mess of human behavior, and Jesus says simply, “Father, forgive them.”

It is a word that we each need to hear for ourselves. The Ash Wednesday service of ashes is a place where we perhaps can especially hear that word. During the service, as ashes are placed onto the forehead of each person in the mark of the cross, it is a tangible sign that the cross applies to you—the forgiveness that Jesus brings is meant for your life—and so as we receive the ashes, it can be an experience of personally receiving the grace and mercy of Christ.

But then Jesus' word of forgiveness speaks further. As Jesus pronounces forgiveness upon all of us from the cross, it is a call to us to show the same kind of forgiveness toward others. Forgiving others, of course, can be hard. As C. S. Lewis once observed, "We all agree that forgiveness is a beautiful idea, until we have to practice it." It is especially difficult when someone does you a serious wrong. But no one has ever suffered more serious wrong than Jesus did on the cross. When Jesus prays forgiveness for his tormenters, he shows us that when we are living in God's grace, there is no limit to the forgiveness that we can show for others. In our world today, a world filled with wrongs and grievance and resentment, such forgiveness is one of our deepest needs.

It is precisely such forgiveness that we meet at the cross. The cross exemplifies what John would later observe in his gospel—that "God sent His Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." [John 3:17] At the cross we experience God's forgiving love, drawing us who are sinners back into fellowship with God; and as we are reconciled with God, we are inspired and empowered to become agents of God's grace for others.

A few years ago in Pennsylvania, a woman named Nettie Gibson was driving to work when suddenly a silver SUV went left of center and crashed head-on into her. Ten hours of emergency surgery brought Nettie from the brink of death. Months of recovery followed. She lost her job. Her husband left her. She suffered ongoing health problems requiring multiple additional surgeries. The driver of the SUV was a 63 year old woman who was drunk; her name was Eileen. Nettie was angry and depressed. One year after the accident, Nettie was in the courtroom on the day when Eileen was being sentenced; the sentence was 8 to 16 months in jail. At the close of the sentencing, Nettie approached the public defender and said, "Please let your client know that I forgive her." Afterwards Nettie remarked, "I wasn't in control of that woman's actions that morning, but I am in complete control of how I respond from here on out. I decided to choose forgiveness over hate and animosity."

Nettie went on to become very active in Mothers Against Drunk Driving; she spoke regularly at victim impact panels that are mandatory for drunk driving offenders. Two years after the trial, she was giving her talk, telling her story, and recognized a woman sitting in the crowd. It was Eileen. The two had never personally spoken. When Nettie asked for questions after her talk, Eileen stood up. "I am so sorry, I am so sorry," she said, "I don't deserve your forgiveness." The two went on to talk in depth. It turned out that Eileen had had chronic alcohol trouble, and the morning of the crash, she had resolved to kill herself. She had

intended a single car accident; she had not noticed Nettie's vehicle. When she found out after the accident that she had seriously hurt another person, she was devastated. She still could not forgive herself. "That bothered me," Nettie said. "I explained to her that Christ had forgiven her. I had forgiven her. To find peace, she had to forgive herself."

Eileen continued to struggle with forgiving herself, but she said that the whole experience brought her much closer to God, and she no longer was contemplating suicide. Nettie said that she finally understood why it all happened—it was to save a woman's life.

We never deserve forgiveness; but that is the point of what Jesus does for us on the cross—to bring us what we do not deserve, the infinite mercy of God. And when we receive God's grace, it finally changes our whole perspective on life. We can forgive ourselves and find peace; and toward others, we can choose forgiveness, instead of resentment or bitterness or animosity. So we can say with Jesus, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"; and we can join with Jesus in bringing life to the world.