

**“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”
(The Seven Last Words of Jesus: The First Word)**

Luke 23:32-38

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on the First Sunday in Lent, February 14, 2016]

I

For Christians, Good Friday is the crucial day of the year.

It is crucial not only for the church year,
but also for the history of the world.

The source of the word *crucial* is significant.

It comes from the Latin *crux*, meaning ‘cross.’

Here is Webster’s definition of “crucial”—

*Having the nature of a final choice or supreme trial;
supremely critical; decisive.*

That conveys something of the unique character of the day we call Good Friday,
and of the words Jesus spoke on that day.

Many years ago someone brought together from all four gospels the words our Lord spoke during the hours that he hung on the cross.

Ever since then these sayings have been identified as the “Seven Last Words of Jesus.”

It used to be the practice in many places for the churches to hold a three hour Good Friday service, noon to 3 pm, when seven pastors would preach on the Seven Words.

My practice at every church I’ve served is to devote the season of Lent, Palm Sunday, and Easter to preaching on each of the Seven Words.

So starting today we will focus on each of these Seven Words in an attempt to understand more deeply the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross.

The Seven Words of Jesus from the cross are like seven panels of a single stained glass window.

They reflect the light of the total event of the crucifixion of our Lord.

They are not just 'words spoken,'
 but they are symbols of the deeper meaning of that cross,
 and what Jesus' death means for you and me today.

The challenge before us is to experience these seven words in a new and unique way,
 so that something important and powerful will happen in our lives during this season of Lent.

If we would truly prepare our hearts for the joy of Easter Sunday,
 we must first encounter the agony of Good Friday...
 where Jesus is crucified on a cross of wood between two thieves,
 and is buried in a borrowed tomb.

The meaning of that event is embodied in these Seven Words that Jesus speaks during the course of his pain, agony, and humiliation.

II

The First Word is perhaps the most familiar and the most quoted of the seven.

“And Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.’”

They did not know what they were doing...or did they?

The soldiers knew what they were doing.

They were skilled in the cruel art of execution.

Crucifixion was an exceptionally gruesome method of torturing a person to death,
 carried out by the Roman government not in secret,
 but in public.

a political appointee whose job was to keep order in that tiny, troubled province.

He was responsible for people—
both Jews and Romans—
who expected him to keep the peace.

He worked hard to get along with the local authorities—
it was easier for everyone that way.

But Pilate also wanted the emperor to know that he was doing his job down in Palestine—
keeping a subject people in subjection,
without pushing the point so hard that they pushed back.

When the Sanhedrin sent Jesus to him,
Pilate tried to send him back.

The last thing he needed was to get caught up in a religious dispute.

Then someone mentioned that Jesus was a Galilean,
and Pilate had a brainstorm.

Herod, the governor of Galilee, was in town for the Passover—
let **him** deal with Jesus.

But after playing with Jesus for a while the way a cat plays with a mouse,
Herod sent him back to Pilate again.

Pilate tried three more times to release Jesus,
but when it became clear that the people wanted blood,
Pilate gave in.

He had nothing personal against Jesus,
but there was no sense defending one man if it enraged everyone else.

Pilate was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

So he washed his hands of the whole affair,
and ordered the crucifixion of a man he believed to be innocent.

IV

The high priest Caiaphas knew what he was doing.

He was the protector of the Jewish people who were under Rome's thumb.

He was appointed high priest by Valerius Gratus,
the Roman governor before Pontius Pilate,
and he knew what that meant.

For fifteen years Caiaphas had collaborated with the Romans to keep things running as smoothly as possible.

First, so that Jews stayed off crosses and out of the dungeons.

And second, because there were clear advantages to working with Rome.

The roads were better than they had ever been,
crime was low,
and Roman troops kept Israel safe from other enemies.

The taxes were terrible, it was true,
and no one like living in occupied territory.

But the cost of challenging Rome was much higher than the cost of compromising with Rome.

So when Caiaphas heard about the Galilean who was stirring up the people,
his mind went into overdrive.

Passover was coming, when tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands, of Jews from all over the world would pour into Jerusalem.

It was a dangerous time, with Israel celebrating her escape from her old oppressors,
the Egyptians.

If Caiaphas ignored the reports that were coming to him
and let the agitators go on agitating,
anything could happen.

There could be riots.

There could be a revolt.

A lot of people could die.

Those with influence could lose their positions.

No matter how Caiaphas did the math, it came out the same:
better that one person should die than many.

Subtract the agitator, and the whole equation calmed down.

Caiaphas, too, was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

He was just doing his job.

And besides, the powerful never want to do anything that will result in the loss of their power.

So Caiaphas did what he had to do.

He secretly arranged to bribe one of Jesus' own followers into betraying him,
so that under cover of darkness he could be arrested and condemned to die.

V

Judas knew what he was doing.

He wanted to bring about the revolution.

Surely Jesus would not allow himself to be killed.

Surely he would speak the word and all Israel would rise up.

Surely he would lead the army that would send
the Roman legions fleeing in terror.

But Jesus wasn't turning out to be the kind of Messiah Judas wanted.

Yes, he had heard the teachings of Jesus,

he had witnessed his miracles—
 how the blind could see,
 the lame could walk,
 the deaf could hear.

But Jesus had not turned out to be the Messiah he expected and wanted.

Judas' hatred of Rome was so deep,
 his desire for Jewish independence so strong,
 that he was willing to put the life of his dearest friend,
 his master who had called him and who trusted him,
 on the line to make the revolution happen.

VI

The soldiers...

Pilate...

Caiaphas...

Judas...

would you or I, had we been present, fault any of them for what they were doing?

This makes Jesus' word of forgiveness all the more remarkable.

Never have human beings done anything so dark as to condemn, torture, and then crucify the Son of God.

And yet Jesus prayed for them,
 asking that God would be merciful to them.

It was not the pain they inflicted on him that hurt the most.

It was the condition of their souls,
 the evil that had caught up with them and taken possession of them,
 and left their hearts hardened...
 to goodness,
 to joy,
 to hope,
 to love itself.

The greatest tragedy that can overtake a person is to come to the point where—
 sin no longer hurts,

cruelty no longer shocks,
 evil is no longer hateful,
 suffering is no longer disturbing.

When that happens to a human being, it is possible to look into the face of what one knows to be wrong, and not even blush.

Then one becomes afflicted by a kind of spiritual leprosy.

One of the worst things about the disease leprosy is when the lepers' fingers no longer have any sense of feeling.

In the simple task of cooking their meals, the lepers cannot feel the heat.

So they burn their hands in the flame, which causes irreparable harm.

Why? Because they do not know what they are doing.

Does the greatest damage to our lives and our world occur not from the sins of commission,
 the sins we commit that we are aware of,
 but from the sins of omission,
 the sins we commit that we are not aware of?

Jesus prays for those who put him on the cross that day so long ago,
 because they really did not know what they were doing.

If anyone had the right **not** to forgive,
 it was Jesus.

If anyone had the right to lash out in anger,
 it was Jesus.

If anyone had the right to feel unjustly persecuted,
 it was Jesus.

Yet Jesus forgives them all.

He prays for them and he prays for you and me,
 whose sins helped to put him there.

VII

So my friends, the First Word from the cross is the most surprising of all—

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Jesus doesn't just see the act of evil that is being committed.

He also sees people for who they really are.

When he first meets Peter, he doesn't see just a poor fisherman from a small village on the Sea of Galilee.

He sees someone who has the potential to lead the church.

When Jesus meets Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector of Jericho,
 he doesn't just see the most sinful person in the region—
 for that's how the chief tax collector would have been seen by
 his fellow Jews—
 he sees someone seeking redemption.

When he sees the woman caught in adultery,
 he doesn't see her sin—
 he sees a person in need of forgiveness and healing.

Jesus does the same from the cross.

He doesn't just see the soldiers,
 Pilate,
 Caiaphas,
 Judas,
 and the terrible decisions they made.

He sees the persons behind those decisions,
 and so he loves them,
 and so he can forgive them.

Forgiveness is a gift you give the other person **and yourself**.

But here's the big question: how do you do it?

You may want to forgive...
but feel totally incapable of doing so.

You want to let go of resentment...
but you may honestly feel that you don't have it within you.

Well, the **wanting** is a good first step,
because true forgiveness is a gift from God.

So you may think, "Well, I can't do that."

And you are right.

You can't, but God can.

VIII

Martin Niemoller was a German Lutheran pastor during the 1930s when Hitler was rising to power in the Nazi party.

From the very beginning Niemoller saw what Hitler was and what he had in mind for Germany, so Niemoller became a leader of the confessing church movement that opposed the Nazi party on every occasion.

Because of this he was arrested and placed in a Nazi concentration camp, where he was Hitler's special prisoner.

Day after day he watched the prison guards mistreat the prisoners, and he pondered the words of Jesus on the cross,

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

He did not see how such an act of forgiveness could be humanly possible.

When he was released from the concentration camp, Martin Niemoller wrote about his inner struggle during his eight years of confinement.

He said he was grateful that he was not released sooner because it was during the latter part of his imprisonment that he learned what Jesus really meant when he said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Outside Niemoller's cell window at Dachau a gallows had been set up.

He could see it day after day as other prisoners were put to death.

He could hear their prayers and their curses.

"That gallows," he wrote, "became my most reliable teacher. There were questions in the back of my mind: What will happen, Martin Niemoller, on the day they lead you out there and put you to the test? When they put that rope around your neck, what will be your last words? Will you cry out, 'You criminals, you scum, there's a God in heaven, you'll get yours.' Or, will you be able to say with Jesus, 'Father, forgive them'?"

What would you say?

What would I say?

Can we even begin to imagine what we would say
if placed in such a circumstance?

Martin Niemoller went on to write:

*"It took me a long time to learn that God is not the enemy of my enemies.
In fact, [God] is not even the enemy of [God's] enemies."*

IX

Brothers and sisters...that is the way of Christ...the way of the cross.

On the cross God turns enemies into friends...

by forgiving them,
by loving them,
by saving them.

Jesus simply prays, *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."*

This means at least two things.

There is nothing you or I could ever do, or say, or be, that would put us beyond the reach of Jesus' prayer.

Nothing at all.

And it also means that no one else,
no one at all,
is beyond that reach.

Jesus' prayer comes from a place beyond human comprehension.

From that circle of divine grace we hear these words today as though they were being spoken for the very first time...

as though they were being spoken at this very moment by the living Spirit...

spoken for each one of us:

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Amen.

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