

***FINAL WORDS FROM THE CROSS:
FATHER, FORGIVE THEM***
Luke 23:26-27, 32-38
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
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First Sunday in Lent

As we enter the season of Lent, it's natural for us to focus on ourselves. Lent calls us to take an honest inventory of our lives and do some spiritual house-cleaning. For many, Lent is prime time for self-examination, self-discipline, and self-improvement. Which is all well and good; but notice the preoccupation with self. It's easy to make Lent a season for navel-gazing, to make it all about us.

But at its truest and best, Lent doesn't ask us to focus on ourselves; it asks us to focus on Jesus Christ and what it means to be his faithful disciples. Lent is an intense season of apprenticeship, where we pay special attention to our Master and try to emulate him. We see him in action and, above all, listen to his words. Typically, we focus on what he says during the prime of his earthly ministry – to individuals who are sinful and sick, to crowds gathered on mountainsides, to his disciples in private. But in hearing the master teacher while he is alive and well, we may forget that he is still teaching when he is dying on a cross.

When my father died thirteen years ago, I happened to be visiting in Texas where he lived. But I was not actually with him when he passed away. I was driving between Houston and my hometown of Corpus Christi. I didn't arrive in time to be with my dad at the moment of his death. When I got to my parents' home, I wanted to hear the details of those last hours and minutes of my father's life. I remember asking my mother two questions in particular. First, "Did Daddy die peacefully?" And secondly, "Did he say anything? What were his last words?" My mother assured me that Daddy had died without struggle, and that the last words on his lips were words of gratitude and love.

A dying person's last words are important because they tell us something about the state of that person's mind and heart as their life comes to an end. Sometimes they reveal the nature of that person's faith and hope. I have stood in the room in London, England, where John Wesley died in 1791. The tour guide reminded us of the last words Wesley spoke shortly before he took his last breath: "Best of all, God is with us." What a beautiful benediction upon a life well lived.

During the six Sundays in Lent, we'll be examining the last words Jesus spoke before his death, all of which were spoken from the cross. There are seven sayings in all. One saying appears in both Matthew and Mark, the famous cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The other six sayings are scattered through the passion narratives of Luke and John. Church tradition has blended the Gospel accounts and given the seven last words a particular order.

And so today we will consider what is regarded as Jesus' first word from the cross. Notice that it is addressed not to the human bystanders at the scene but to his Father in heaven. Jesus' first word from the cross is a prayer. This alone isn't surprising given the centrality of prayer in our Lord's life. What is surprising is the content of the prayer. Here he is in a moment of

unspeakable pain and anguish, with nails driven through his hands and feet and people at the foot of the cross hurling insults at him. Yet, when he prays, he does not pray for his own needs, for relief or comfort or deliverance. He doesn't request anything for himself. Rather, he prays for others.

But there is another surprise here. This isn't your usual prayer of intercession: "Bless Aunt Margaret as she recovers from COVID-19." "Be with our son Billy as he takes his algebra exam." Jesus doesn't pray on the cross for his family and friends. No, the first thing the crucified Jesus does is to pray for those who have crucified him: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34a).

How different this prayer could have been. Under the circumstances, Jesus could have prayed, "Father, condemn them. . . Father, punish them. . . Father, destroy them." But instead he prays, "Father, forgive them." Show mercy toward those who are unmerciful; pardon those who commit the unpardonable.

One thing you have to say about Jesus: he is consistent; he practices what he preaches. Throughout his ministry he implores his disciples to practice forgiveness, to avoid vengeance and retaliation, to love and pray for their enemies. And here on the cross, he does exactly that. He doesn't just talk the talk; he walks the walk. "Father, forgive them."

When he prays, "forgive them," he is referring, of course, to the Roman soldiers who carried out the execution. He is also thinking of the Jewish leaders who brought the charges against him, and of the crowds who were swayed to join in calling for his death. But perhaps he is thinking of us, too, because it was our sin as well as theirs that sent Jesus to the cross. Not just the sin of Pontius Pilate and the Roman centurion and the high priest, but your sin and mine. All of us had a hand in Jesus' execution. When Jesus says, "Forgive them," he's offering his forgiveness to us – to Aunt Margaret and little Billy and the cashier at Stop and Shop and the person you see in the mirror each day. The question becomes, are you and I willing to accept God's forgiveness? God has given us this free gift, unearned and undeserved. Have we received the gift, opened it, appreciated it?

During this Lenten season, our Bible Study Fellowship group will explore Adam Hamilton's book *Final Words from the Cross*. In the first chapter, Hamilton tells about a man who came to his office one day for counseling. The man was weeping over things he'd done to hurt others in the past and the pain he felt about it – his sense of separation from God and from the victims of his wrongdoing. Of course, he needed to seek forgiveness and make amends to those whom he had harmed. But the first step he needed to take was to ask for God's forgiveness. Hamilton took the man into the sanctuary and walked to the cross. Hamilton said, "Look at the cross. It was there that Jesus purchased your forgiveness. It was there he prayed, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' He prayed that for you. He has already prayed for your forgiveness." The two men stood there in front of the cross and prayed together. With tears coming down his cheeks, the man finally understood that God's grace was a very costly gift, but that it was already paid for, awaiting his acceptance of it.

Hamilton writes about another member of his congregation – a young man who had gone off to college and made a mess of his life with drugs and alcohol, then returned home on Christmas break. After nearly dying in an automobile accident, he came to his senses. One day he entered

the sanctuary when no one else was there, and he walked up to the cross above the choir loft. He wrapped his arms around it and began to cry. He knew intuitively that what was necessary for his forgiveness and salvation had already been given. He just needed to claim it.

At the outset of today's service, we read the familiar litany of confession and pardon that we customarily recite on Communion Sundays. Let me ask you: have you ever really internalized the words of that litany? "*Hear the good news: Christ died for us while we were yet sinners; that proves God's love toward us. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.*" Do you just repeat these words by rote, or do you feel them in the depths of your heart and the marrow of your bones?

Jesus' first word from the cross is a prayer of forgiveness, a free gift of pardon. The question is, have you and I accepted that forgiveness and received that gift?

But there is another question that is just as important: Are you and I able to share that gift with others? Are we able to forgive as we have been forgiven? After all, there is a reason why Jesus prayed this prayer aloud: so that others could hear it and remember it. He wanted to model forgiveness for us. He wanted us to mirror his ministry of forgiveness in our relationships with others.

God knows, it's not easy. More often than not, forgiveness goes against the grain of our natural instincts. I recently read the obituary for a 94-year-old great grandmother in Tampa, Florida. The obituary made waves on the Internet after the notice exposed a bitter family dispute. The death notice for Josie Anello began like any other, describing the woman as a "loving and faithful wife" who died peacefully in her home a few days earlier. Then the obituary revealed a long family feud that became a hit on blogs and social media sites. The notice read: "She is survived by her son A. J., who loved and cared for her; daughter Ninfa, who betrayed her trust, and son Peter, who broke her heart." It was obviously Josie Anello's son A. J. who wrote the obituary. He accused his sister Ninfa of stealing from their mother. The alleged theft by Ninfa including using her mother's Social Security checks to go on vacations with her husband. Ninfa denied A. J.'s claim, saying, "My brother is not telling the truth. He's having his moment of revenge."

You and I could dismiss this story as weird and pathetic if it didn't sound so familiar. Who among us has not wanted to have his or her moment of revenge? Who among us has not wanted to expose and condemn another's wrongdoing and get even?

I've often wondered how Jesus avoids this temptation. Why does he resist the urge to judge his tormentors and, instead, ask his Father to forgive them? Because, he says, "they do not know what they're doing." Jesus doesn't make excuses for his executioners, but he feels empathy for them. He knows their hearts, their motivations, their intentions. They don't understand who he is and what his mission is about; they are ignorant and gullible; they are just following orders. Yes, God will still hold them accountable for their crime, but Jesus pleads for God to forgive them because they don't realize they are committing a crime.

Many of you know that forgiveness is often a long and difficult process. Before you and I can come to the point of forgiving someone who has harmed us, we have to acknowledge that a real wrong has been done and feel the pain of it. We may even feel hatred in our hearts toward the wrongdoer. Our instinct is to hang on to that hatred, to harbor a grudge, to demonize the person who has hurt us. We get stuck in our negative feelings, making it impossible to forgive.

Well, in his first word from the cross, Jesus shows us how to get unstuck: we have to develop a new way of seeing our enemy; we have to look at our enemy with eyes of empathy. In most cases, the person who hurt me is also hurting. My enemy is a flawed and fallible human being just like I am, a mixture of light and darkness. I have the capacity to do helpful things but am also capable of doing hurtful things – sometimes, because I simply don't know any better. I lack the self-awareness and good judgment to respond to others in a redemptive way. When I recognize this truth about myself and then recognize it in my enemy, I acquire empathy; and it is empathy for my enemy that opens the door to forgiveness.

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” As I reflected this past week on Jesus' prayer from the cross, I had a sobering thought. It occurred to me that Jesus wants me to join him in saying this prayer. Over the years, I've made a few enemies, and a few people have done great harm to me. Can I look at these people and pray, “Father, forgive them”? Can I replace bitterness with compassion and vengeance with mercy? Can I forgive people who never repent or ask for my forgiveness? It isn't easy for me to do, but the alternative is to be consumed by resentment, anger, and hate. If Jesus can pray, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” then with his help, I can, too.

At the end of his chapter on Jesus' first word from the cross, Adam Hamilton suggests an exercise. I invite you to do this exercise here and now. Take a moment to think about people who have harmed you. List them in your mind; perhaps even write their names on a piece of paper. And then join in the prayer that Jesus prayed for those who crucified him. Here is the simple prayer: *“Father, forgive them. Father, you know their heart, and you know my pain. I pray for those who hurt me. Forgive them, and heal me. Amen.”*