

SERMON: Words to Live By: "Father, forgive them..."

TEXT: Luke 23:34

I feel like I have hundreds of good stories about amazing people who have suffered the most devastating crimes against them, and who say they forgive the perpetrators. Hundreds of stories. We all have one. And yet, not one of them is about me.

Like all of us, I have been hurt. Betrayed. Lied to. I have been abused, in some ways. Stabbed in the back, only figuratively speaking. Slapped in the face, again figuratively. But I have never been a victim of any violent crime. None of my close family members have ever been beaten or shot at or murdered. But I will admit that there are some people who have hurt me, whom I have trouble forgiving. I've tried, and I continue to try, every once in a while. It's not like I'm consumed by hatred and anger 24 hours a day, but the pain is still there, and forgiveness is just too hard.

Yes, yes, I know. Forgiveness is more for our own benefit than for the benefit of the one we forgive. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said, "Forgiveness is the final form of love."

(www.brainyquote.com)

Well, certainly forgiveness was the "final form of love" shown by Jesus as he was dying on the cross.

But before I go any further, you might be wondering why Jesus is already on the cross on this first Sunday of Lent. While Lent is often thought of as a journey *to the cross*, it always bothers me that we spend very little time *at the cross*. We certainly don't give enough attention to the final words of Jesus spoken from the cross. I like to follow a theme for the season of Lent, so this year's theme is called, WORDS TO LIVE BY. The words Jesus speaks are more than just expressions of his own suffering and grief. They are important lessons for us. His dying words are for us, WORDS TO LIVE BY.

The first is probably the most familiar of them all. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Up to this point in chapter 23 of Luke, Jesus has been arrested and accused of claiming to be the King of the Jews and stirring up rebellion among the people. He was on trial before King Herod and Pontius Pilate. But Pilate found no guilt in Jesus; certainly nothing deserving death. When he announced that he planned to release Jesus, the crowd - made up of chief priests, leaders, and common people - shouted, "Crucify him!" Three times, Pilate argued with them. "I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death.... But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified, and their voices prevailed." (Luke 23:22-23)

So, Jesus is nailed to the cross. And he prays to God, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Government leaders, religious leaders, soldiers, and everyone gathered at the cross are forgiven with those words. Just moments after the nails have pierced his hands and his feet. It's amazing to me that he can speak at all with the pain he must be

suffering. And then, to ask God to forgive them? To me this is almost harder to believe than his resurrection. I can't fathom it.

Looking at this passage alongside the reading about Jesus being tempted by the devil in the wilderness, helps us to see it in a different light. I can almost imagine the devil tempting Jesus a fourth time, perhaps whispering in his ear that he could destroy the entire crowd, bring Jesus down from the cross, and take away all his pain. But that temptation only gives Jesus greater resolve and a clearer perspective on what's happening here. He knows where the evil is, and it's not out there in the crowd. It's in the devil who has tempted him before, and is tempting him again.

Now Jesus sees and remembers that it is out of their ignorance that they have crucified him. "They know not what they do." They don't understand who Jesus really is. They don't see that his teaching and his actions come from love. They are threatened by his power. They are suspicious and afraid because he's so different from any other leader they've ever known. They

think that this will be the end of him, that they will be rid of him, that his influence will die with him. But “they know not what they do.” They don’t understand that the consequences of his death will endure for thousands of years and will consume the world. They don’t understand that his death is only the beginning.

Forgiveness may come more easily to us if we try to give the benefit of the doubt to the offending person. I saw a story on Facebook the other day, where a person had really angered another driver on the road. They were uncertain of what they had done, but they were also afraid. They pulled into a gas station and the other driver followed. He got out of his car and began yelling, then he stormed off. The offending person sensed that something else was wrong, as his reaction was over-the-top for the minor thing that happened. The person drove to their workplace, still confused about this event. Hours later, they came out to their vehicle to find a hand-written note on the windshield: “I am very sorry. My mother just passed away and my emotions are not right. Please forgive me.” They know not what they do.

Back to Jesus on the cross, the only thing stronger than his physical pain at that moment, is his unconditional love for them.

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

How are these dying words of Jesus WORDS TO LIVE BY for us? A reminder of the importance of forgiveness, of course. And a reminder to consider what the other person might be going through. But before we begin to berate ourselves for our struggles with forgiveness, let us be reminded that from the cross Jesus forgave **us**. And continues to forgive **us**. We might easily have joined the people who were at the trial, those in the crowd, and those at the cross that day. We have been there, in a sense, mocking him and shouting, “Crucify him!” in how we treat other people, in what we have done and what we have left undone. In our acts of neglect, ignorance, and unfaithfulness we have participated in the crucifixion. Listen, as Jesus speaks to us, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Furthermore, let me suggest something, not to let us off the hook, but to offer a bit of compassion and grace. A number of years ago, I had an “aha” moment, as I was pondering these words of Jesus. I don’t want to suggest that Jesus didn’t forgive the crowds, but I do want to point out that his words were a prayer to God. He didn’t say, “I forgive you.” He prayed, “Father, forgive them.” Perhaps in that moment, in the depths of human suffering, Jesus could not bring himself to say it.

I offer this to everyone like me, who find, in the depths of our pain, forgiveness is just too hard. Maybe, as the first step toward bringing ourselves to forgive, we can ask our Father God to do it for us.

Hanging on the cross, Jesus was in agony. But in his dying words, he was still teaching us. Still loving us. Still praying for us. He was giving us WORDS TO LIVE BY: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” May we learn and live accordingly, to the glory of God. AMEN.