

The Seven Last Words of Christ
- The First Word -
“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” -Luke 23:34

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From the 23rd chapter of the Gospel According to Luke, the 33rd and 34th verses:
“When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’”

Please join me in prayer: “Holy God, I thank you for the gift of your Word. If there is anything at all that you would have us hear in my words, let us hear that and forget all the rest. Amen.”

I.

I have to admit to a degree of awe with respect to the congregation here gathered. You are, you must know, among a relatively small group of people who attend worship on Good Friday. I do not know what kinds of motivations have brought you here, nor what kinds of rearrangements had to be made with your schedules and commitments, but I want to thank you for being here and for bearing witness.

I believe that bearing witness is the most powerful implement in the church’s toolbox. Indeed, what else do we have, for we cannot *prove* our faith in any scientific sense. What we can do is to bear witness to the light that has come into the world, and it is particularly important to bear witness to that light on this darkest of all days, Good Friday. Most people today, including most Christians, are plodding through their day, perhaps uttering “Thank God It’s Friday” in friendly banter with those around them. But we find ourselves called to the unique task of bearing witness to the cross, that most grotesque of symbols, and we open ourselves to be bothered, to be surprised, and perhaps to be *blessed* by the flowers that spring forth from that dead, dead tree.

But you inspire me as a congregation for one more reason. In coming together, you bear witness to the promise of the church universal. By gathering as American Baptists and Roman Catholics, Methodists and Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Disciples of Christ, Lutherans and United Church of Christ, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Mainliners and Sideliners, orthodox and not-so-orthodox, black and white and shades in-between, English speakers and bilinguals, gay and straight, Republicans and Democrats and Independents, you bear witness to the diversity of the church, which is Christ’s Body, arguably the most diverse community in the history of the world. You’ve come together to hear our common story, the Word which, in our witnessing, gives us our identity and holds us together as a common family. You’ve come to hear the seven last words of Christ, and you’ve come wondering whether some of your local pastors might have anything intelligible to utter in the face of so great a mystery

as the cross. I will make no promises for myself nor any of my brothers in the faith. For we, too, are called to be nothing more, and nothing less, than witnesses. For acting as a witness, while risky, is the boldest and most beautiful task of faith.

II.

The first of the seven last words is: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” The first word is a word of *forgiveness*. One of our tasks today is to wonder why tradition has chosen this word to be the first word.

The most obvious reason may be that it offers an answer to the question: “Why did Jesus have to die?” This is a fairly elemental question, yet one that theologians spend volumes attempting to answer. Not only theologians, but 4 year-olds, namely, my 4 year-old son, have asked this question.

I’ve found it’s not enough to say to him, “Well, son, all of us die some day,” because, while that is true, the Christian story insists that Jesus’ death had cosmic importance, and that importance is difficult for a dad to explain to his 4 year-old, let alone a theologian to the church.

There is a strong tradition within Christian theology that answers the question, “Why did Jesus have to die?” with a doctrine known as atonement. Simply put, the theory of atonement asserts that Jesus’ death by crucifixion was required as the only means by which human sin could be forgiven. To give you a sense of how complex the doctrine of atonement is within Christian theology, I found at least 9 versions, or views, of this doctrine: the Christus Victor view, the Governmental view, the Limited view, the Moral influence view, the Penal substitution view, the Ransom view, the Satisfaction view, the Substitutionary view, and the Unlimited view. Now, before I lose you, let me assure you that I will not be describing any of these versions. In fact, I want to point out that sometimes theology can get in the way of a helpful understanding of God.

For example, one aspect that all of these theories hold in common is that they start with the assumption that Jesus’ death is first and foremost about us, we humans, that is. Atonement theory assumes that Jesus had to die because we needed God’s forgiveness. While we should be assured of God’s loving regard, not only for humanity, but for all of creation, is it not a bit self-centered to assume that every time God acts, it is to fulfill some *human* need? Don’t misunderstand me, humans *are* needful, and Christian confidence is based in trusting that what humans need most, humans will find in God and God alone. But, as Dr. Walter Brueggemann, a biblical scholar in my own tradition, recently mused, “God doesn’t exist at the beck and call of humans alone. God has God’s own life to live.”

In other words, as we begin our Good Friday vigil, let us not pretend that today is all about us. In the world out there, it is tempting to make everything about us: my rights, my freedom, my property, my values, my money, my guns, my choice, my, my, my. I am not immune. In this very moment, I am concerned about my church, my Easter Sunday sermon, my wife, my son and daughter, my health, my future, my

friends, and my interests. My my my. It's not that our regard for these things has no place. It's just that here, and now, on Good Friday, we have the opportunity to let go of *my* story and behold, however briefly, God's story, which is really my-stery.

III.

I recall the words of the great Disciples of Christ preacher, Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock, who, when asked upon his retirement what he would do differently if he could go back and do it again said, "I would like to have talked about God more."

I think what Dr. Craddock may have meant is that *my* story can get in the way of mystery. And consider the mystery behind the first word, Jesus Christ's word of forgiveness. It is *not* a word addressed to us. Jesus is *not* speaking to you or to me. Jesus is *not* speaking to the church. Jesus is *not* speaking to anyone here and now and Jesus was *not* speaking to anyone there and then. Jesus was *not* speaking to the Roman soldiers. Jesus was *not* speaking to his lily-livered disciples. Jesus was *not* speaking to the weeping women. Jesus was *not* speaking to the ogles or the bystanders or the rubberneckers or the passersby. Jesus was *not* speaking to any of these. Jesus was speaking to the only one in whom he put his trust. What he said, while it may have been overheard, was meant for no human ears. What he said, while it may have been recorded by Luke, was meant for no human pen. Jesus was speaking to God and to God alone. He said, "Father, forgive."

For those of us who find fantastic beauty in the Triune understanding of God, we bear witness that God is having a conversation within God's self. Further, we can bear witness that it is in the nature of God to ask forgiveness, and in asking forgiveness, Jesus reveals that it is in God's nature to forgive. We receive God's forgiveness not because we deserve it. We receive God's forgiveness not because we remember to ask for it. We receive God's forgiveness not because God was obligated by a power outside God's self to give it. We receive God's forgiveness not because we even know what it is we've done to require it. We receive God's forgiveness because God is one who forgives, and God forgives even in the shadow of the cross. It may seem like folly to us, but to God, this kind of folly is strength.

This mystery is proclaimed by Paul in I Corinthians, chapter 1: "We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

No theory can explain this mystery - once explained, it would cease to be mystery and would once again become *my* story, but if we can remember that we are created in the image of God, we might just be foolish enough ourselves to forgive those who have trespassed against us, foolish enough to forgive those who have sinned against us, foolish enough to forgive those who are indebted to us.

How far can this forgiveness go? Are there limitations? There is one simple answer to these questions and it is that to which we have come to bear witness today: the cross.

IV.

Let us pray (silent prayer):

God, we behold you today, suffering, forgiving, loving, praying, dying. Thank you for allowing us the blessing of being witnesses to your forgiveness. Thank you for the blessing of overhearing your gospel whispered in prayers too wonderful for our ears. Thank you that my story is absorbed into your story, your mystery. Remind us of your steadfast love, even as we become aware that your forgiveness extends to corners of the world our minds cannot imagine or allow: to the hurtful mother, to the vengeful father, to the backstabbing friend, to the ideologue, to the terrorist. Remind us now of your image in us, that we might begin again to believe that we are capable of great love, even foolish forgiveness. In the name of Christ crucified, we pray. Amen.