

The First Word

A Sermon for Good Friday
“Seven Last Words of Christ”
Christ Church Episcopal, Westerly, RI
April 19, 2019
Text: Luke 23:34

The text from the Gospel of Luke: “Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they cast lots to divide his clothing.”

This is the scene as Jesus is being hung on the cross by the Roman soldiers. It is quite literally impossible, I think, for us to imagine the true horror of that moment for Jesus, for those who loved him and were now gathered nearby, blinded by tears for this man who had transformed their lives with his words and his presence. That Jesus even at this horrible moment was able to think about forgiving the men who were assigned the task of executing him is remarkable, but not surprising. Forgiveness had been and remains still today the cornerstone of all Jesus was about during his earthly life. But his ability to forgive was extraordinary! Truly super human! How are we ever to measure up? Who among us would pray for the very persons intent on ending our lives through a means intended to be torturous?

And let’s not forget that Jesus had more forgiveness to offer than to these Roman soldiers. He had to forgive the people who had greeted him with shouts of joy and adulation just a few days

earlier when he rode triumphantly into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. Welcomed like a king, by the end of the week the same crowd was shouting “crucify him!” Were they in his heart as he spoke these words of forgiveness? I think so.

And let’s remember it wasn’t just strangers who let him down that week. His own disciples deserted him at the time of his arrest, running off to hide. Even Peter – the rock – denied Jesus just as Jesus told him he would. The Temple officials who were so troubled by Jesus’ teachings that they took him before Pilate, the Roman governor, to ask that he be put to death. We don’t think about them much, but surely we have to wonder if Jesus’ forgiveness at this moment extended to them. The Scriptures are silent on this point unfortunately since the anger at these people has consumed far too many of Christ’s followers for millennia creating the scourge of anti-Semitism we see on the rise again today. Yet I am sure Jesus would have forgiven them too. You see, he understood in a way no one else did that all of this was part of God’s plan for him. To the very last moment he drew breath, Jesus trusted God totally and completely and it is this trust, this unbounded love for God, that empowered the extraordinary forgiveness he lived and preached.

Ironically it is forgiveness that got Jesus into trouble with the Temple officials in the first place. In so many of his healings, like of the man lowered through the roof by his four friends to be

healed of paralysis, Jesus didn't say to him, "be healed!" No. He said, your sins are forgiven. Take up your mat and walk. The Temple officials went nuts over this and all those other times when Jesus dared to forgive sins of people who were suffering and in trouble: The woman caught in adultery, the blind man, the ten lepers and on and on.

Forgiveness was indeed the foundation of all that Jesus taught and did. When his disciples asked him to teach them how to pray as John's followers had been taught by John, Jesus included forgiveness as the hinge point of that prayer we call the "Lord's Prayer." This prayer is part of who we are today as Christians and what comes right in the middle of it? These words: "forgive us our sins (trespasses, debts, etc) *as we forgive* those who sin (trespass, etc) against us." This concept of forgiveness is central to the intent of the whole prayer! We honor and exemplify our love and trust for God through every act of forgiveness. Dear friends, if you remove the charge to forgive in order to be forgiven from this prayer, it becomes just a jumble of pretty words. Jesus was, in so many ways then, the embodiment of forgiveness.

At my church, we have spent this Lenten season pondering and reflecting deeply on forgiveness as Jesus taught and lived it. We have discerned several important insights on forgiveness which are too often gloss over in the church. We realized that too often we only think about forgiveness in the church on a cosmic

scale – the big ticket item of Jesus’ role in the ultimate forgiveness of all of us by God. But Jesus was about so much more than that. Jesus’ life and ministry testifies to the reality that forgiveness is *necessary* if one is to truly follow Jesus with all one’s heart and soul. As the line from the Lord’s Prayer makes clear, we must first forgive if we expect to be forgiven – by God or by anyone. In a very real way, then, forgiveness is a requirement for following Jesus. It is not an option. But neither is it easy or simple to do.

This is because forgiveness is *personal* – very, very personal. Jesus explains this in the Sermon on the Plain found in Luke’s gospel when he tells the disciples you must love your enemies. No exceptions. Anybody can love – and by extension forgive – people you already love. It’s much more difficult, nearly impossible, to forgive people you genuinely don’t like, people who have intentionally hurt you. Yet that is what Jesus’ forgiveness requires. What credit is it to you to love those who already love you, he asks. The answer is clear – no credit at all.

So clearly forgiveness is *complicated* – a lot more complicated than we like to think about. Jesus knew this and tried to make it a little easier for the disciples to understand. “How often must we forgive someone?” they asked. “Seventy X seven” he answered. Meanwhile they were thinking, “oh great, now he expects me to do math in my head too!” Not really. What he wanted them to do is understand that forgiveness is never easy,

that it always takes effort, that it requires setting aside self and the need to be right. This requires reaching beyond anger and hate and the need to be right, reaching toward love made possible through God's love for us. Simply put, we have to work at forgiveness, constantly.

This is why forgiveness is a *process*. We can see this process in Jesus' interaction with the woman with the alabaster jar as recounted in Luke's Gospel. This story appears in all four Gospels but only in Luke is the emphasis on forgiveness. In the others, the significance is seen as a foreshadowing of his death with the understanding that the woman is anointing Jesus for burial. Not so in Luke's version. Here Jesus is celebrating her full personhood, and most of all her understanding that the gift of forgiveness she has received has totally changed her and her life. Her act of anointing is an act of gratitude for the great gift she knows she has received.

And this is why forgiveness is *humbling*. Peter discovered this when in his last moments with Jesus he boldly claimed he would never deny Jesus, sticking by him even if it meant his own death. And then he denied Jesus three times, just as Jesus said he would. We can imagine that Peter was crushed in that moment when he realized what he had done, totally dejected and remorseful. And yet he went on to become the rock for the church Jesus always knew he would be. How? Because he knew better

than anyone what it meant to be forgiven no matter what he had done.

So, dear friends, on this day when we recall Jesus last moments and last words from the cross, we cannot be surprised that his first words were those of forgiveness. He knew – he embodied – forgiveness as only he could as God’s beloved son. The standard he set for us in this relentless of forgiveness, deserved and undeserved, is something we can only aspire to. But aspire we must. Always. Every day. I have no doubt we will all fall short on this task more times than we care to enumerate. But try we must. Try we will. Fail we will. Thank goodness our God is all about forgiveness. Amen.