

Series: Prayers from the Cross**Today: "Father, Forgive them for they know not what they do"****Text: Luke 23:33-34**

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
Sunday, February 21, 2010 (First Sunday in Lent)
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. As of today we have only 42 days left to prepare ourselves for Easter. In the Jewish tradition of Passover, it is a time to get rid of all the old "stuff" in our lives; the stuff which keeps us from fully experiencing the grace of God; and seek out the new leaven of God's grace which we receive in the good news of the resurrection.

Our preaching theme for Lent is on prayer. For our focus, we are using the final prayers which Jesus uttered from the cross as a way to help us understand how we are to pray if we want to be followers of Jesus.

Every so often I am privileged as a pastor to be at the bedside of someone as they are passing from this life into the life that is to come. I say it is a privilege because it really is. It is a holy moment to stand with someone as they breathe their final breaths, and if you have ever been with someone when they are in those final moments, you know there is an economy of words which are exchanged. They just don't have the energy for conversation, so you learn to listen carefully because you know that whatever comes out of their mouth is important because it is costing them precious time and energy to say it.

So we listen carefully to the final words of Jesus, and we see immediately that he prays; not for himself, but for the very people who are killing him. And I don't know about you, but I am curious about this question: *When you are faced with your own death, what will you pray? Will you even think to pray?*

If I have learned anything in the last six years of dealing with my wife's illness it is this: Every day is a gift which needs to be treasured, and we ought not to waste time on the non essential things in life. So as my wife regularly reminds me, if I think I have an eternity of tomorrows to take care of what is essential, I am the one who is denying death, not her.

So I would invite you to listen carefully to these last words of Jesus because each of them teaches us how to pray. This morning he teaches us to pray for the forgiveness of others because as we do, we free ourselves to be fully present to be used by God in this moment and to allow God to work in us and through us in whatever circumstance we find ourselves. We learn not to let our anger get in our way; not to carry grudges which can eat us up inside; but to be fully present to what God wants to do in our lives; right here and right now.

The setting for this first prayer is not a setting we think of when we think of prayer. It was not a quiet place where Jesus had pulled away to be alone with God. It is in the midst of a mob.

"This is the King of the Jews!" That is what the sign said which hung over his head in three different languages. And yet, as we stand at the foot of the cross, it is hard for us to imagine that this poor, wretched creature is the king of anything. His body has been brutalized beyond our imagination. We are standing there surrounded by a flurry of activity and a cacophony of sounds. There is a group over here gambling for his clothing. There is another group over there chiding his claim to be the Messiah, the chosen one of God. The two criminals, one on each side, add to the scene. One rails at him, and the other pleads with him.

"This is the King of the Jews!" Really now? The King of the Jews stripped nearly naked for the entire world to see. The King of the Jews crucified on the town garbage heap? The King of the Jews is struggling for his final breath. In the midst of the cacophony which surrounded him we hear these words from the cross: *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."*

As Robert Tannehill has observed, “*This prayer and the final prayer in verse 46 (Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit) put brackets around the crucifixion. In one he addresses the horizontal dimension of life, his opponents, and in the other the vertical dimension of human existence, his relationship with God. (Luke, p. 340).*”

The dying words of Jesus of Jesus are a prayer that God might forgive his tormentors. His words are an object lesson for us as in what it means to follow this one who is claimed as King of the Jews.

Forgiveness is not the natural course of action for most of us. It is an intentional act of our will. I learned that several years ago when we spent the entire season of Lent on the theme of forgiveness. I learned from you how difficult it is to follow Jesus in practicing these words from the cross. Nothing that I have preached in my 14 years with you touched so many people. I had many conversations about how difficult it is to forgive someone who has hurt us deeply; someone who has done something so heinous that forgiveness seems out of the question.

I suspect a line from Mark Twain comes closer to standard operating procedure for most of us. Twain has just concluded a tirade against a publisher who has swindled him outrageously. In an attempt to be conciliatory he writes, “*The man has been dead for nearly a quarter of a century now, and please don’t get me wrong. I have some compassion for him. In fact, after years of suggesting the possibility of his ultimate destination, I want you to know that if I could send him a fan, I certainly would.*”

Our scripture reminds us that forgiveness requires the one doing the forgiving to love beyond the limits of human tolerance; beyond the bonds of natural affection. It is a love of the will rather than a love of the emotions. It is not necessarily something that one feels. It is something that one does.

Frederick Buechner puts it this way: *To forgive somebody is to say in one way or another, ‘You have done something unspeakable, and by all rights I should call it quits between us. Both my pride and*

my principles demand no less. However, although I make no guarantees that I will be able to forget what you have done, and though we both may carry the scars for life, I refuse to let it stand between us.”

Father William O’Malley was one who had to learn this lesson in a most difficult way. He was called to the hospital late administer the final rites of the church to a dying patient. When asked if he wanted to make confession, the patient hesitated. *“Father, when I was young I did something that I have never told anyone about. It was so bad that I haven’t spent a single day since without thinking about it and reliving the horror.*

I worked as a switchman on the railroad all my life until a few years ago. Thirty two years, two months and eleven days ago I was working on the swing shift when a bad winter storm came through. There was a lot of rain, 50 mile per hour winds, and almost no visibility. It was two nights before Christmas, and to push away the gloom the whole yard crew drank all through the swing shift. I was drunker than the rest of them, so I volunteered to go out into the wind and rain and push the switch for the 8:30 freight.”

The man’s voice dropped to a whisper as we went on, *“I guess I was drunker than I thought because I pushed that switch in the wrong direction, and that freight train slammed into a passenger car and killed a young man, his wife, and two of his children. I have had to live with my being the cause of their deaths every day of my life since then.*

There was a long moment of silence as the man’s confession of this tragedy hung in the air. After what seemed an eternity, Father O’Malley put his hand on the man’s shoulder and said very quietly, *“My son, I forgive you.”*

The man snapped back, *“Father, you may forgive me, but that is not what I need right now. I need to know if God can forgive me.”*

Father O’Malley said, *“My son, I believe that if I can forgive you, God can forgive you.”*

The man said, “*But how do you know, Father? How do you know?*”

To which Father O’Malley responded, “*Because in that car were my mother, my father and my two older sisters.*”

FATHER, FORGIVE THEM FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO. If you hear nothing else today, start there. Think about who it is in your life you need to forgive. Pray for them. Ask God to forgive them. Image what it would be like for them to receive God’s forgiveness, and yours. How might it change your life if you no longer had to carry around the anger you have been bearing for years.

It is the first prayer Jesus utters from the cross. It is, perhaps the most difficult for us to accept, yet it may be the most important for us to hear. Amen.