

“Father, Forgive Them”ⁱ
Wednesday, March 1, 2017
Ash Wednesday

 **Luke 23:32-38 (NRSV)**

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.

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.”***

And they cast lots to divide his clothing.

And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, ***“He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!”***

The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, ***“If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”***

There was also an inscription over him, “*This is the King of the Jews.*”

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks, be to God.

[MESSAGE]

Jesus speaks his first words from the cross, not to us, but to God.

For three years, he has spoken to us; preaching, teaching, exhorting, and instructing us.

Here, on this Friday afternoon, as **we** nail him to a cross, Jesus turns from us and speaks to his Father: “*Father, forgive them, they didn’t know.*”

Roman soldiers, Jewish Sanhedrin, raving mob – how did each of you decide to murder God’s Son?

Well, we thought we were standing up for law and order.

We believed we were supporting good biblical values.

We were just soldiers obeying orders.

We had this gut feeling.

We weren't actually in charge of the proceedings,
it was done by the government.

Everything was done according to the best legal
advice.

Isn't it curious that the very first word Jesus speaks in
agony on the cross, is ***"Father, forgive"?***

Such blood, violence, injustice, crushing pain, and
ripped flesh nailed to the wood.

With all the possible words of recrimination,
condemnation, and accusation, the first thing
Jesus says is, ***"Father, forgive."***

Earlier he commanded us to forgive our enemies
and pray for those who persecute us.

On the cross, Jesus prays for forgiveness for his
worst enemies, those who resist the Good
News, ***"Father, forgive" – US.***

Let us pray...Lord, you come to us with words of hope
and healing, mercy and forgiveness. Too often we
reject your Good News. Guide us today as we seek

to understand what your last words have to say to us. In Jesus' name, we pray. **Amen.**

Imagine for a moment, at the creation of the universe, God did not say, “*Let there be light,*” but rather, “*Let there be forgiveness.*”

There will be no order out of chaos, no new creation, no life from death, no reconciliation between us and God without forgiveness first.

Forgiveness is the first step, the bridge toward us that only God can build.

The first word into our darkness is,
“*Father, forgive.*”

This must always be the first word between us and God, because of our sin and because of God's eternal quest to embrace us.

Forgiveness is the price God is willing to pay to be with people like us who, every time God reaches out to us in love, turn away or ignore.

Here on the cross, God the Father had a couple choices.

One, God could abandon us. God could have said,
*“All right, that’s enough. I did everything I
could to reach toward them, gather them in,
save them, and bring them close, but when they
stooped to killing my Son, that’s it!”*

Two, God the Father could have abandoned God
the Son, handed him over to our sinful hands.
God could have left the Son hanging there as a
helpless victim of our evil.

But neither of these are real options for our God,
the God revealed to us in the Bible.

God the Father cannot be separated from God the Son.

God the Father **stays** with the Son and, in the
suffering and horror, gets us in the bargain.

God the Father **stays with us** and gets a crucified
Son in the bargain.

There, from the cross, Jesus is doing what he did
throughout his ministry.

God the Father, by receiving Jesus’ plea for
forgiveness of us, is doing what the Father and

the Holy Spirit always does – reach out to sinful humanity.

This is a dynamic testament to the action of the Trinity – The Son is doing on the cross what the Father and the Holy Spirit have done throughout the history of the world; he is simply intensifying it through the cross.

So, the first thing we hear is, “*You are forgiven.*”

Then we hear, “*Can we talk?*”

It is an interesting move from “*Father, forgive them,*” to “*They don’t know what they’re doing.*”

And I don’t think Jesus is saying, “Father, forgive them because they should not be held culpable; they don’t rationally know what they’re doing.”

Instead, I think he’s saying, “Father, forgive them, ***for among other things,*** they don’t know what they’re doing.

Thanks God our relationship with God this day does not depend on our awareness of what we’re doing

and who we are and what this all means and what were our motives.

Our relationship with God is determined by God.

That's pre-emptive forgiveness.

Remember all the stories of Jesus walking around Galilee before this day came.

He repeatedly approached people to say, "*your sins are forgiven,*" and "*go and sin no more.*"

Almost nobody ever *asked* to be forgiven.

Jesus knew that without forgiveness being the first word there would be no meeting between God and humanity.

We get the sense that forgiveness precedes repentance.

Most of us lack the courage, the sense to confess, without the prior knowledge that our truthfulness about ourselves will not, by God, destroy us.

So, Jesus offers forgiveness from the cross, long before our truth-telling begins.

Followers of Christ do not confess sin in order to receive forgiveness, but rather because we are already forgiven.

“Father, forgive them, they don’t know.”

That this is the first word of Jesus is curiously at odds with us.

For us, if we forgive at all, it is a distinctly secondary word.

First, *“let the offender ask for forgiveness, say that he is truly sorry, then comes forgiveness,”* – maybe.

At Calvary, nobody asked to be forgiven.

Nobody said, *“I’m sorry,”* or *“Oops, I guess we’re executing the wrong rabbi, forgive us.”*

And yet Jesus said first, *“Father, forgive.”*

Jesus forgives because they/we **don’t know** our sin as sin; we are unable or unwilling to recognize it.

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

Today, as we re-imagine that Friday, as Jesus hangs from the cross, we ponder the enormity of our sin, our cruelty, our stupidity.

This day, as Jesus speaks his first words from the cross, we ponder the enormity of his grace.

There is still time.

“Father, forgive us. We didn’t know.”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

ⁱ This worship series is based on the book, *“Thank God It’s Friday”* by William H. Willimon, © 2006 by Abingdon Press, Nashville