

Father Forgive Them
Luke 23:32-34
February 18, 2015
Ash Wednesday

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals – one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. These are Jesus’ first words from the cross. They are powerful words. They are awesome words. How can I, or any preacher, expand or expound on these words which are so magnificent in their simplicity.

Sometimes, maybe often times, we do things that are wrong and we don’t see the full consequences of what we have done. Let me give you a couple examples.

An alcoholic is often not aware of how much he is abusing his spouse and children. He isn’t fully aware of the depth of the pain he is causing his wife and kids. The lives of addicted men and women are so taken over by alcohol or drugs, that nothing else matters. They don’t really comprehend the painful consequences of what they are doing. They might know the facts of their conditions, but the addiction blinds them to reality.

Another example. A man was driving home from work when his cell phone slipped off the seat and onto the floor of the car. He knew he should leave it there until he could stop, but he rationalized he would only be distracted for a moment. He reached for his phone and in a split second, his car swerved over the center lane and sideswiped another car, killing a mother and her two children. He didn’t comprehend the full consequences of his foolish act.

Things like this happen all the time in our lives. We do things we feel may be foolish, possibly harmful, but we really don’t fully comprehend how foolish and harmful our actions may be.

This was the case on that Friday when Jesus was being crucified. The soldiers just thought they were doing a job; they didn’t really comprehend that they were killing the Son of God. The religious leaders just thought they were framing another religious fanatic; they didn’t really believe they were plotting against the very Son of God in the flesh.

So tonight, let us look closely at the first words of Jesus from the cross: *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing* (Jn 23:34).

The first word is the word “**father.**” The first sentence from the cross is a prayer and,

with that prayer, Jesus teaches us how to pray. Jesus first speaks from the cross not to the women, not to the religious leaders, not to the other men on the cross, not even to the gawking crowd below. Jesus didn't look down at his tormenters but up to God, and Jesus began his prayer, "Father..."

Jesus' choice of the word, Father, reveals his closeness to God. In all of Jesus' prayers, he never addressed God as Lord, King of the Universe, Omnipotent Ruler of the Heavens. The distinctiveness of Jesus' prayer life was to call God intimately by name, by the word, Father.

One Biblical scholar says that Jesus' whole life can be summarized by that one word, Father. Jesus was the first person in the Bible to use the familiar equivalent of "dad" or "daddy" to begin his prayer life. In our prayer lives, we are to address God closely and warmly as we would when talking to our own parents.

We are to pray intimately to God in all circumstances, especially when we are in pain. When the pain is at its worst, that's when we often pray the most. Jesus did the same. When we are in our worst pain, we call out to God to help us handle the problems of this life.

The second word is the word "**forgive.**" Rather than calling on God to damn and punish those people who were crucifying, who were killing him, Jesus' heart was full of compassion, not rage. The normal thing would be to swear, curse, scream at his tormenters, but the heart of Jesus was just the opposite. Jesus called out for God to forgive his tormenters rather than punish them.

Now, forgiveness for people who are killing you is not easy. It isn't easy to love our enemies, to love the mean people in our lives. It's relatively easy to forgive your friends after an argument, or forgive your parents for not understanding, or forgive your children for doing dumb things. That kind of forgiveness is somewhat easy.

However, it isn't easy to forgive your enemies, to forgive those people who would like to see you dead. It wasn't easy for Jesus either, but that's what he did from the cross. Jesus loved the people who were hurting him and killing him. That's what is so amazing: to love your enemies is a miracle from God.

One possible translation for the word forgiveness is "to let go." Jesus forgives our sins; Jesus lets go of our sins. We must learn to let go. To explain how letting go works, let's talk about how to trap monkeys. A monkey trapper sets coconuts at the bottom of the coconut tree. Those coconuts have holes drilled in them, holes just smaller than a monkey's fist.

In order to get the meat out of the coconut, the monkey squeezes his hand through the hole in the coconut. When his is inside the coconut, the monkey opens his hand and grabs. The monkey's hand is now full of coconut meat. But the only way the monkey can get his hand out of the coconut is to let go of the coconut meat.

The only way we human beings ever become free in life is to let go – to let go of the way our parents have hurt us in childhood, let go of the pain of our past marriage, to let go of all the mistakes we have made. The only, and there are no exceptions, the only way to freedom is to let go of all the hatred and anger about wrongs I have done in the past or wrongs others have done to me. From the cross, God lets go of our sins.

Jesus looks up to God in his first word from the cross, asking God to forgive these people. To let go of their sins.

The third word is the word, “**them.**” Them refers to all the soldiers who had whipped and nailed him. Them refers to all the religious leaders who had falsely accused him and are really the culprits in the crucifixion of Jesus. Them refers to all the gawkers in the crowd who were just watching. Them refers to all the disciples who had run away.

And them refers to you and me. We often pray, “Father, forgive me for...” We are forever asking God to forgive us for the things we know we did wrong, to forgive us for not doing the things we know are right. We are forever asking God to forgive us for things when we didn’t comprehend how stupid they were to do at the time. “Father, forgive me” is on our lips and in our hearts all of the time.

We are in need of God’s forgiveness, but so often, we don’t have time for God. We don’t pray as we should. We don’t love as we could. Our lives are far too busy for God and love and spirituality. We are not the quality of Christian men and women, Christian boys and girls that we are called to be. So Jesus prays, “Father, forgive them.” Them includes us.

Our last point: **for they do not know what they are doing.** The soldiers around the cross didn’t know they were crucifying the Son of God. The religious leaders didn’t comprehend that they were plotting against the very Presence of God. The gawkers didn’t realize that they were watching the most loving human being of all time being killed.

They didn’t get it.

It’s the same with us today. We don’t get it. We don’t feed the hungry of the world and they die of starvation, while we all eat well. We don’t get it that we are killing Christ who lives in those starving children. We don’t visit nursing homes and those elderly people slowly dying of loneliness while we are too busy. We don’t get it that we are neglecting Christ who lives in the bodies of our aging elderly friends. It’s not just the sins of commission that bother us; it’s also the sins of omission that really get to us. And we don’t know what we are doing.

We don’t really comprehend what we are doing when we have no time for God, when we are so busy living our lives we just can’t squeeze in time for God. And so we cry out, “Father, please forgive us, for we too don’t know what we are doing.”

That Friday on the cross, even though the crowds below him did not confess or repent or even admit guilt, Jesus called out to God, "Father, forgive them."

Jesus' forgiveness and love from the cross was pure grace, it was freely given as a gift to people who did not deserve the gift. And so it is with us.

The first word from the cross is pure grace for you and me and the world: Father, forgive us, for we do not know what we are doing.