

Ash Wednesday, 2023
Father, Forgive Them
Luke 23: 33-34

Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing."

Dear Friends,

The very humbling news of Ash Wednesday is that from dust we came, and at the end of our days here on earth, back to dust we shall go. The really good news of Ash Wednesday is that we begin our journey to the cross and then to the empty tomb where Jesus Christ makes all things new. In these 6 midweek Lenten services and then on Good Friday, we listen in on the last seven words spoken by Jesus and written for our learning.

I invite you to come to Calvary's cross tonight and listen in as Roman soldiers spit at, slapped around, and savaged the kind and gentle son of a small town carpenter, and as they did so, He prayed Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing. Listen in as strong and brutish men whipped and beat the very Son of God bloody, they pushed and they pounded and they pierced and they crucified, and as they did so, He prayed Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing. Listen in as religious leaders lied and incited the crowds to cry out for the death penalty, and as they did so, He kept on praying, Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing.

Tonight I invite you to come to Calvary's cross with all the bumps and the bruises and the wounds others have inflicted on you, come with all of the disappointments and the frustrations and the pettiness that others have inflicted on you, come with all of the times loved ones have let you down, with all of the memories of friends betraying you, with all of the bitterness that built up in your hearts and you're having a hard time letting go...and listen in as Jesus prays, Father forgive them, for they don't know what they have done and are doing.

Three meditations tonight on the subject of forgiving others, in response to God forgiving us first.

Meditation #1 - to pray for God to forgive people who aren't apologizing isn't normal. The normal desire that rises up in our hearts when people are sinning against us is to ask God to punish them. The normal criminal who had soldiers

bending over them and driving rough nails through their hands and feet would curse God and cry out for them to go to hell. The normal boy who gets shoved around and belittled looks for a way to retaliate. The normal woman whose husband treats her with contempt wants to give him a taste of his own medicine. The normal elderly person who feels abandoned by her family has a hard time letting go of the bitterness that builds up in her heart over time.

In Psalm 35, David cries out for God to punish his enemies. In 2 Kings 1, when Ahab's men came to arrest Elijah, he called down fire from heaven to consume them. When a Samaritan village didn't welcome Jesus, James and John wanted to call for fire from heaven to burn it to the ground.

But then there's Jesus. He's different than normal human beings. Instead of sinking to their level, He rises above it all. When the religious leaders go low, He goes high. When the mob ridicules and taunts, He stays quiet. When Judas betrays him with a kiss, he gently warns. When Peter denies him, Jesus gives him a look. Jesus even finds an excuse for those who are bullying and abusing and crucifying him. They don't know what they are doing. They were by no means innocent of wrongdoing, but they were ignorant.

For normal people, ignorance isn't an excuse, but for Jesus it was. And so He prays for His Father to not count their sins against them. He prays for His Father to find a way to forgive them, even though they weren't apologizing, even though they had no intention of repenting, much less changing their ways.

Meditation #2 is that Jesus did far more than pray for His Father to forgive, He made the sacrifice which made forgiveness possible. In the days of Moses and Aaron, when the people of God rebelled, God sent a plague among them, and they died by the thousands. Then Aaron took a censer, he put fire on it from the altar and incense. He stepped between the living and the dying to turn away God's anger. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, Aaron the high priest went into the holy place, burned incense before God, and sprinkled the blood of sacrifices on the mercy seat.

You and I need such a high priest. We have sinned, not just against one another, but ultimately against the Father in heaven. The holy and almighty God of this universe has every reason to look down upon us sorry sinners, to pound his gavel, and to pronounce a guilty verdict. But praise be to God, at just the right time, on a dark Friday afternoon, the very Son of God intervened. He stepped between a righteous God and an unrighteous world, and He made the sacrifice necessary to make forgiveness of sins possible.

If you're here tonight looking for a good reason to forgive people in your lives who have wounded you in the past, I have one for you - His Name is Jesus Christ, true man, born of the virgin Mary, and true God, begotten of His Father from eternity. Instead of spending your days paying back those in your life who have hurt you, understand that Jesus already paid that price, he paid his Father, He paid it at the cross, and He paid it in full.

Meditation #3 is to understand what forgiveness is not and what it is. Forgiveness is not saying to people in your life who have hurt you, "it's ok, don't worry about it." Rather it is saying to them, "What you did hurt me, but Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away all our sins." Forgiveness is not about waiting for people to say they're sorry and making sure they learned their lesson, it's about receiving a daily dose / boatload of God's forgiveness, it's about being grateful for that forgiveness, and then it's about being generous with that forgiveness.

Forgiveness isn't so much about forgetting what people have done against you, it's about making a decision not to get even. It's not about waiting for people to have a change of heart before we can trust them again, it's about being proactive with God's grace as a way of giving the Spirit of God an opportunity to change their hearts.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers full of folks who realize that from dust and ashes they came, and to dust and ashes they will return. They are at the same time normal and not so normal. Their first inclination in life is to give people what they deserve, but as often as they spend time at the cross of their Savior, that often they find great joy in giving people what Christ has earned for them. On the one hand, they struggle with hearts full of pettiness and holding grudges, and on the other hand, they find that by the working of the Holy Spirit, a spirit of gratefulness and generosity is rising up inside of them.

They have their bad days, their decent days, and their good days.

- On their bad days, they live according to conventional wisdom - an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Or to say it another way, "Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me."
- On their decent days, they forgive those who are apologizing, and they take it easy on those they can see are doing their best.
- On their good days, they forgive others in response to God first of all forgiving them. And if you listen closely, you just might hear them crying out to God in heaven above. - "Father, forgive them, for they really don't know what they are doing." In Jesus' Name. Amen.