

Series: Final Words from the Cross
Sermon Delivered on March 9, 2014:
"Father, forgive them."
By Rev. Donna L. Martin

The last words of a dying person are normally never forgotten. If a person knows they are dying, the words they choose to make the effort to say to those listening are words they consider significant. They may express the pain of living or the pain of dying, a comfort needed – anything from fix my pillows to tell my son I love him. In some instances, no words are spoken, while in others the words uttered are sentiments that disclose their values, priorities, and innermost thoughts. The last words of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, were, "The best of all is, God is with us," while the great Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon's final words were, "Jesus died for me."

Contrast those words of faith with the final words of some other persons of history. For example, right before P.T. Barnum died, he asked, "How were the receipts today at Madison Square Garden?" Humphrey Bogart's last words were, "I should never have switched from Scotch to Martinis." Joan Crawford was filled with anger when her maid began to pray out loud and said, "Don't you dare ask God to help me!" Louis Mayer, the film producer, gave his philosophy of life (and death) when he said, "Nothing matters." Pancho Villa, the Mexican revolutionary, said, "Don't let it end like this. Tell them I said something." Karl Marx turned to his housekeeper, who had urged him to tell her his last words so she could write them down, and shouted, "Go on, and get out. Last words are for fools who haven't said enough" (<http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/father-forgive-them-dave-mcfadden-sermon-on-jesus-christ-102782.asp?Page=2>).

Well, today we're beginning a series that will extend throughout the season of Lent that will focus on the final words Jesus' uttered from the Cross. Sometimes these are called the seven last words of Christ, but in truth they are actually seven statements. And these statements are definitely not the words of someone who didn't say enough when He was alive, but each one of them does tell us something important about who Jesus was and they provide us with insight into what was on his heart and mind while he was dying.

So today we look at Jesus very first words from the cross. And the fact that they are his first words means that they are of great import, for to speak at

all while being crucified would have required great effort. Jesus would have had to pull himself up by the nails in his wrists in order to expand the diaphragm enough to speak (Final Words from the Cross, Adam Hamilton, pg 16). So what did Jesus have to say that was worth increasing his already agonizing pain? He lifted himself up, took a ragged breath and said, "Father, forgive them because they do not know what they are doing."

Did you notice, the first words Jesus speaks from the cross are a prayer? Considering the pain, humiliation and the injustice of crucifixion, most of those being crucified would be crying out in pain, cursing their accusers, begging for relief, or confessing their guilt, but not Jesus. The first words he says from the cross are a prayer. Jesus had spent so much time in prayer with God throughout his life and ministry that it came natural, even in this horrible situation, to pray to his Father about what was on his heart.

And what is on Jesus' heart as he hangs by nails dying on the cross? It was not concern for himself or what he was going through. No, Jesus prayer is for others. He is pleading for the forgiveness of those responsible for his crucifixion. He says, "Father, forgive them."

But who is "them?" "They" are the Roman soldiers who tortured and taunted him. "They" are the Jewish religious leaders who insisted he be tried and punished. "They" are the people in the crowd that yelled "Crucify him!" "They" are Pontius Pilate who could not stop washing his hands. "They" are the disciples that abandoned him when the going got tough.

Isn't this incredible? While he is dying on the cross, Jesus is practicing what he preached. He is living example of his command to "Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you." This is so countercultural for his day and ours that it boggles the mind. How could he forgive the people who were doing this to him? Could we?

There is a story about a truck driver who is sitting in a restaurant, eating his food and minding his own business. The door to the restaurant bursts open. In swagger several nasty looking members of a motorcycle gang. They walk over to the trucker and bark, "We want that table." The trucker glances up at them and quietly says, "I'm not finished yet." The leader of the bikers leans over, grabs the trucker's cup of coffee, and slowly pours it over the plate of food. "You're finished now," he snarls.

So the trucker gets up silently and walks out the door. The bikers laugh. One of them sneers as they settle in at the table: "He's not much of a man, is he?" A nearby waitress looks out the window and says, "Whoa, he's not

much of a driver either. He drove his rig right over a bunch of motorcycles out there" (<http://www.crcna.org/resources/church-resources/reading-sermons/father-forgive-them>).

Well, we may hate to admit it, but there is a part of us that wants to cheer as we chuckle. The trucker not only got them back, he did them one better. There is a part of us that feels they are just getting what they deserve.

Let's face it, we are part of a society that knows our rights and wants to settle scores, and we are encouraged to do so with a legal system that will help us pursue it. But Jesus says, "Father, forgive them" even when none of those people standing around the cross have said they were sorry, even when, as far as we know, none of them has the slightest regret for what they are doing.

Now in some respects, all those who were responsible for his death that day knew what they were doing, but in a more profound sense they did not. Because you see, they were not crucifying a criminal and they were not just crucifying a political or religious enemy, they were crucifying the very Son of God. In this sense, the Jesus' crucifixion was not just an historical event at which a man was executed, it was a transcendent event – in fact, it was THE spiritual event of all time of cosmic proportions. And in this respect, there was someone else there that day at Calvary.

There was someone else Jesus was referring to when he said, "Father, forgive them." It was us – you and me. ALL of humanity was there that day, so in a spiritual kind of way, the answer to that old gospel song, Were You There when they crucified my Lord, is "Yes, we were there."

The death of Jesus goes well beyond the time and place of First Century Palestine. Jesus' prayer, "Father, forgive them" was about what he was doing on the cross. Because it was on the cross that Jesus offered himself to God the Father as an atonement or remedy for our sins. As our High Priest, he pleaded for our forgiveness while at the same time he offered himself as the sacrifice – the unblemished Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He who was without sin, was setting things right. "Father, forgive them."

As human beings we need forgiveness because we have a problem with sin. And it has been that way since Adam and Eve ate that first bite of apple in the Garden of Eden. And because of our sinful nature, we need a savior because we cannot reconcile ourselves to God. So Jesus act of redemption was not an improvisation, an emergency measure in response to an

unexpected setback. 2 Corinthians 5:19 says that from the beginning (ever since that first bite), "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." That is what it means to love; this is what it means to be love, this is what it means to say that God is love. (Death on a Friday Afternoon, Richard John Neuhaus, pg. 30). For God so loved the world (that would be you and me) that he GAVE his only Son. And the Son said from the cross on which he was dying, "Father, forgive them."

The central focus of the gospel is grace and God's mercy. Still, you cannot appreciate God's mercy until you know you need it. And, my friends, we all need it. We all struggle with doing the wrong things. We all stray off the path. We all miss the mark. But when we as Christians speak of sin, the aim is not to make us feel guilty (although it may take that to come to our senses), but it is to help us discover the grace and healing mercy of God that we so desperately need (Final Words, Hamilton, 23).

John the Gospel writer tells us that Jesus was God's word made flesh. This means that he was both God's messenger and God's message. In other words, God was revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ. And when we see Jesus hanging there on the cross we are meant to see the costliness of grace. It took an incredible act of love and sacrifice to show us grace that is greater than all our collective sin. So our sin is not a trifling thing. The son of God was crucified for it. Yet we are also meant to see on the cross God's willingness to extend mercy and grace to each and every one of us because Jesus died once and for all – for all time and for all people.

God's gift of forgiveness and mercy at once an accomplished feat – it was accomplished that day at Calvary 2000 years ago, but for each of us it only becomes real as we accept it in the present. This is what the season of Lent is all about. During Lent we have forty days in which to examine our hearts and minds and lives to see why we need what Jesus prayed for and died for: our forgiveness.

The world religions scholar, Huston Smith, was once asked to characterize the most notable, most peculiar aspects of the world's three great religions. He said for Islam it is prayer; for Judaism, family; for Christianity it is forgiveness. It is distinctive of the faith of Jesus and to faith IN Jesus to forgive enemies (Thank God It's Friday, William H. Willimon, pg. 10). Forgiveness is both at the heart of the cross AND it is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian.

God's work of atonement and redemption through Christ is ongoing. As the Body of Christ in the world, we are to be actively participating in that ongoing, forgiving work. As we consider Jesus' first words from the cross, knowing they were a prayer for the forgiveness of others, let us spend time reflecting this Lent on how we, as his followers, can do the same. Jesus' message is forgiveness. It is ours to accept, but it is also ours to extend. Amen.