

## **“FATHER, FORGIVE THEM, FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO”**

Meditation by the Rev. Douglas Clark  
Good Friday Service of the Seven Last Words  
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Text: Luke 23:26-38

<sup>26</sup>As they led Jesus away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. <sup>27</sup>A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. <sup>28</sup>But Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. <sup>29</sup>For the days are surely coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.’ <sup>30</sup>Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us’; and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ <sup>31</sup>For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

<sup>32</sup>Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. <sup>33</sup>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. <sup>34</sup>Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots to divide his clothing. <sup>35</sup>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!” <sup>36</sup>The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, <sup>37</sup>and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” <sup>38</sup>There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

Forgiveness, I think we would agree, is a good thing. Our human need to forgive and be forgiven, it would seem, is just as strong and just as deep as our needs for food, water, shelter, sleep, and love. Frederick Buechner writes:

“When somebody you’ve wronged forgives you, you’re spared the dull and self-diminishing throb of a guilty conscience.

“When you forgive somebody who has wronged you, you’re spared the dismal corrosion of bitterness and wounded pride.

“For both parties, forgiveness means the freedom again to be at peace inside their own skins and to be glad in each other’s presence.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life*, p. 305.

Jesus, we know, sometimes provoked the ire of the Pharisees by offering forgiveness to sinners—for the Pharisees believed that only God could forgive sins.

In my tradition, the United Church of Christ, we say in our statement of faith that “God promises to all who trust in the gospel forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace.”

Forgiveness is a good thing. And yet, I must confess, I am troubled by this first word of Jesus from the cross. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” First of all, I'm not sure who the “them” refers to.

Is Jesus asking God to forgive the Roman soldiers who are crucifying him? They know exactly what they are doing: carrying out orders to preserve the empire's peace and security.

Is Jesus asking God to forgive the Jewish leaders who are mocking him? They know exactly what they are doing: participating in the public humiliation of a would-be Messiah.

And if God does forgive the Roman soldiers and the Jewish leaders, will this make a difference in their lives?

When Jesus forgave the sins of the paralyzed man whose friends had lowered him through the roof on a pallet, it made a huge difference in this man's life. He was able to stand up, take up his pallet, and walk home rejoicing.

As much as I believe in forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, I am also aware of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously called cheap grace, “the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance.”

When I am in need of forgiveness, most of the time I know that I am also in need of repentance. I usually know what I'm doing when I cause problems in a relationship. And when I come to my senses and repent and say I'm sorry, this is a good thing.

When I need to forgive someone else, most of the time I want to wait for them to say they're sorry so that they can earn my forgiveness. But I also know that I haven't earned God's forgiveness—just as the Roman soldiers and Jewish leaders did nothing to earn God's forgiveness—and so I need to be more generous with my own forgiveness.

When I hear Jesus' first word from the cross, filtered through my own experience, I hear him saying about us, Father, forgive them, even though they know exactly what they are doing.