

“Did he really say that?”

Luke 23:24-25, 32-34

This year during Lent, we’re looking at the seven last words Jesus spoke from the cross. I’ve never done a series on the seven last words...I’ve never done much study on them, to be honest. I’ve heard them again and again, on one Good Friday after another, and have appreciated them...but only when diving into study for this sermon series have I come to see how incredibly rich and potent these seven last words are.

By the time we hear the first of the seven words, Jesus has been arrested, tried, mocked, whipped, and nailed to a cross. There are only hours left of his life. He is struggling for breath, his body breaking even as it tries to support him, and each movement is agony. But in the midst of this agony, he speaks seven words, utters seven sentences, that are deeply intentional, profoundly countercultural, and have the power, in fact, to change the world.

And he starts with what is perhaps the most surprising of all of these seven sentences.

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

This is such a surprising sentence, that some of the scribes who first wrote these stories down left the whole thing out. They recorded six words, not seven. We can’t know for certain why they left it out. It could be they were all working from one person’s faulty memory, or copying off of each other and one guy got it wrong.

But it’s not hard to imagine that they might have left this sentence out on purpose. Because it’s a surprising, alarming, downright troubling sentence. It’s one we don’t think Jesus could actually mean. It’s not one we could believe he might actually say. One commentator said that of all the troubling lines in scripture, this line troubled him more than

anything. And if we unpack what Jesus is saying here, it's not hard to see why.

Let's start with the first two words: "Father, forgive." Jesus is in pain. In agony. He's at the end of his rope. In a few moments he'll cry out that he has been abandoned by the Father, this is the amount of despair he is in. This is the moment when any of us would be praying for ourselves. Yelling at God, crying out to God, begging the Father to step in and do something to rescue us from this pain, or at the very least provide some solace, some comfort in the face of it.

And Jesus will eventually pray on his own behalf. But first, he prays for others. He thinks about other people, in the midst of his own torment. That makes this word surprising.

We go on. "Father, forgive *them*."

We might be okay if Jesus was praying for good people, for innocent people. If he was praying for his disciples, for his followers, for his family; praying that the Father might protect them and strengthen them and even forgive them for their moments of doubt.

But no. He says, "Father, forgive *them*. And that "them" includes...well...everybody.

It includes the religious leaders who plotted against him, arrested him, and used their power and influence to get rid of the pesky rabble rouser who had threatened the world they worked so hard to protect.

It includes the soldiers who beat him, mocked him, laughed at him, shoved a thorny crown on his head, and drove thick nails into his hands and feet.

And it includes the onlookers. Crucifixion was a public death, a humiliating death. To be crucified was to be deemed so unfit to live as

to not even be human. The Romans said such a person was *damnatio ad bestia* – condemned to the death of a beast. This death was meant to be obscene. And this wasn't done in an enclosed courtyard, hidden away from the rest of the world, but along the side of roads, a public billboard telling passersby – this person isn't like the rest of us...this person, or non-person, deserves your ridicule.

And so the people who walked passed a crucifixion knew the role they were meant to play. They knew that it was their job to increase the humiliation of this non-person by jeering at them, mocking them, taunting them. So, says theologian Fleming Rutledge, “crucifixion is an enactment of the worst that we are, an embodiment of the most sadistic and inhuman impulses that lie within us.”

And Jesus asks to forgive...these people. Them. The embodiment of the very worst of what it means to be human.

Which is alarming to us. Because we know that Jesus said some other things about forgiveness, before this word from the cross.

We know that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”

We know that a little later on in that sermon, Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, and part of that prayer is “Forgive us our debts *as* we forgive our debtors.”

We know that to be a follower of Jesus isn't just to admire what Jesus did...but to do what he did.

And if he's up there on a cross forgiving the very people who put him there, if he's forgiving the very worst in people...then that means we have to, too.

And if that doesn't make you feel distinctly uncomfortable, you're probably not thinking about it hard enough.

Because we have a hard time forgiving people. Saint Augustine said once in a sermon that at his church people sometimes just left out the line about forgiveness in the Lord's prayer, because they knew they would be lying if they said it out loud. To pray that prayer is to make a commitment, to make a covenant with God – I will forgive my debtors, so please also forgive me in the same way.

But do we forgive our debtors? Do we forgive the people who wrong us?

The person who cuts us off on the highway? The person who says an incredibly hurtful thing to us, in front of other people no less? The person who laughed at our childhood dream? The person who didn't love us the way we loved them? The person who stole something from us?

In 2015, a white-supremacist named Dylan Roof walked into Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston South Carolina, sat in a Bible Study for a while, and then shot and killed nine people attending that study. At his sentencing two years later, Felicia Sanders, the mother of one of those victims, looked at Roof and said, "I forgive you."

And my first thought when hearing that was, "Really? Can you really forgive him?" There's something bewildering about that kind of forgiveness. Because it's so hard to let go of anger, so hard to let go of our desire for revenge, of wanting to level the playing field. That would be justice, after all, wouldn't it? And isn't God a God of justice?

Well...yes. He is.

Which is why this conversation that God the Son is having with God the Father takes place on a cross. It's why the Son had to die. Because the

wages of sin is death. And on the cross, Jesus took on that punishment, so the ones he loved would not have to.

Which brings us to the third surprising, troubling, and downright flabbergasting thing about this first word from the cross.

Jesus says, “Father, forgive them, *for they do not know what they are doing.*”

Maybe the ancient scribes left this line out of their first manuscripts because they were a bit embarrassed for Jesus. Because this just... isn't how forgiveness works.

We might forgive someone, but only if they apologize first. That's the order. Someone does something wrong, they recognize that they did wrong, they apologize, and then we forgive them. We can't forgive someone if they don't acknowledge they acted badly in the first place, otherwise what's to keep them from continuing to act badly?

Of course...the soldiers on Good Friday probably didn't think they were sinning against God. They were just following orders. They didn't know that they were killing the one who governed the whole world.

And the religious leaders...well they thought they were doing what their religion required of them. The man had blasphemed, after all. Claimed to be the Son of God. Scripture was clear on what such blasphemy required. They didn't know they were killing the actual Son of God.

And the mocking onlookers...they were just following the custom of the day. They had been told all their lives that this was what you did to those being crucified. Those on a cross were less than human, after all. No harm done. They didn't know they were mocking a man who was in fact *more* than human, was also divine.

They didn't know what they were doing.

And neither do we.

Because that's the real kicker of this story. When Jesus says, "Father, forgive them," he doesn't just mean the soldiers and the religious leaders and the onlookers.

He means me.

He means you.

Jesus died to save *us* from the punishment we deserve, too. It's our own sins that put Jesus up on that cross. Which means his words of forgiveness are for us, too.

And I don't know about you...but I know that I have a hard time admitting when I'm wrong. I don't even know I've done wrong most of the time. And when I do...I'd rather just take that knowledge and drop it in between the couch cushions where no one will find it for a very long time.

Will Willimon, a theologian and preacher, said it this way: "If you are awaiting me to know, to admit, to confess my complicity, my sin, you will wait an eternity, and I am not eternal. Only God is that. If God's going to wait to talk with me until I first admit that I'm a sinner, the conversation will never occur. I'll be too defensive, too deceitful in my guilt. I'd rather die."

But God's not going to wait. God sends God's Son to the cross because he's done with waiting. Because our God, more than anything, longs to be in relationship with his beloved creation. Some people forgive others so they can let go and walk away from that person, freed of their burden. Jesus does the opposite. Jesus forgives us so that he can get close to us. "Forgiveness," says Willimon, "is what it costs God to be with people like us who, every time God reaches out to us in love, beat God away."

The first word has to be “Father, forgive them,” because forgiveness is the bridge between God and us that only God can build. Our repentance is feeble and half-hearted. Our desire for God wanes. Our love of God is lukewarm, prone to falter when something new and shiny captures our hearts.

So God acts first. God speaks first. Speaks a word of forgiveness, and just as his words spoke into being a new world in the very beginning, so now they speak a new thing into being. A new order of things, where God’s love, God’s being-in-relationship with us is not predicated on anything we do, but on everything he *did*.

Which is why, on Sunday mornings, our “Call to Confession” usually isn’t a reminder of just how horrible we all are. Pastor Tom and I (hopefully) don’t stand up here, beating the pulpit, listing off all the ways we’re miserable wretches who need to beg God for mercy.

Instead, the Call to Confession is itself a reminder of forgiveness. It’s a word of hope, a word that declares, not what we have done, but what Christ did. Because only in that knowledge, only in the assurance of the forgiveness that has already been extended to us, do we have the courage to acknowledge before God just how desperately we need that forgiveness.

So this first word from the cross is...surprising. And a bit troubling. And convicting. And also, deeply, deeply comforting. This is a word we want to find in Scripture. This is a word of hope for us, spoken by a man in unimaginable pain, and from a place of unimaginable love.

We do not know what we are doing. But our prayer in this Lenten season is that we might know, just a little more, God’s love. This is Paul’s prayer for the church in Ephesus, and his prayer for us, that we, “being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with

all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

Would you pray with me?

Father, forgive us, for we do not know what we are doing.

And help us to forgive one another.

May we live with the same expansive love that led you to the cross.

May we lay down our pride that we might live in peace with our neighbour.

And when we fail to do so...as you know we will...forgive us again.

We cannot comprehend the sacrifice Jesus made for us...

but we give you thanks and praise nonetheless.

Help us to live in gratitude and love.

Amen.