

Sermon: “The First Last Word: Forgive”

Scripture: Luke 23:24

Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans

Date: March 1, 2020

We are going from 0 to 80 this Lent so hold onto your pews! Usually we have 6 weeks to walk gradually with Jesus through his journey leading up to his end days in Jerusalem, when he begins to warn his disciples about his impending death, when he does his last miracles, when he's just outside of Jerusalem grieving over the city, when Mary breaks oil over his feet, when he enters through the gates on a donkey, turns over the tables in the temple, when he shares with his disciples the last supper, his agony in the Garden, his betrayal and the arrest, and then we finally get to the brutal ending on the cross.

This Lent however we aren't wasting anytime, we're going right to the foot of the cross and we'll be there with Jesus in agony for 6 weeks. I'm not so sure it's a great selling point to encourage church attendance – “come spend your Sunday mornings with us over the next 6 weeks as we linger on a tortured suffering executed human being and what he said with his last remaining breath”, but then last Lent many of you came faithfully week after week to hear me preach and the choir sing about greed, lust, sloth, pride and the other 7 Deadly Sins so Jane, Judy and I assumed you were gluttons for punishment and would stick with us here too!

Because there is something to this. There is something to the last words our loved ones speak to us isn't there? Or the last exchange we have with them even if they are unable to speak on their death bed? Whether they are words that haunt us or words that we treasure in our hearts or words absent that we wonder might have been said cause we missed them or they couldn't get the words out. We want to hang on their last words to us, their last words of their earthly life.

And if that is true of our loved ones isn't it equally true of the One we say has created us and saved us, our Great Teacher and Lord? Wouldn't we want to mull over and meditate upon the words he uttered with the last of his dying breath? Shouldn't those words live in our hearts to haunt and inspire us? We have to be clear that we do not believe they were his last words period because as Christians we believe that he continues to speak to us even today. And yet still, there is something essential to the words spoken in the moment of his dying, that they might hold an even greater weight because they were the only words left when everything else, all pride, all drive, all desire, all life was gone. Wouldn't we want to want to hear what Jesus said then?

Across the centuries faithful Christians have wanted just that and so there's grown a tradition where churches have taken the last words or phrases that Jesus spoke while hanging on the cross and meditated upon them and pray with them, usually during Holy Week. None of the 4 Gospels have all of what Jesus said from the cross. Matthew and Mark have Jesus speaking once, Luke has Jesus speaking 3 times, and John also has him speaking 3 times. Taken all together, with some of the Gospels reporting the same words, there are 7 words or phrases that Jesus speaks from the cross. Of course it is good and right that there are 7 because 7 is one of the holiest numbers in all the scripture and is a symbol of completeness – 7 days of creation being the most obvious example - and it's referred to as the number of God. So this Lent we are going to preach – and the choir sing – the 7 Last Words of Jesus from the Cross. Since there are just 6 Sundays in Lent – the 7th being Easter – we'll end our consideration of Jesus' final two words from the cross on Palm Sunday and then on Easter Sunday we'll listen to Jesus' first words uttered in his resurrected presence.

But we start here: at Jesus on the cross.

The first word he speaks in that agony with his dying breaths as written in the Gospel of Luke is a prayer. He prays a word that showed up so many times over the course of his teachings and healings in and around Galilee. He speaks from the cross the word “forgive”. He prays to God “Father, forgive them.” He’s talking about his crucifiers but also maybe his friends who just that night had left him alone, “Father, forgive them.” And also maybe he speaks that word to us for all the ways we betray or deny or crucify love in our lives. “Father, forgive them”.

The word had been on his lips so many times before he spoke it from the cross. To the paralyzed man whose friends lowered him through the roof to Jesus, he said first before healing him “your sins are forgiven.” He said in his famous sermon on the mount: “do not judge others and you will not be judged. Forgive and you will be forgiven.” The disciples, remember, asked him how to pray and he told them and us across all these ages to say “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” When Peter hears Jesus mentioning forgiveness once he asks Jesus “well, how many times do I need to forgive someone who sins against me and keeps sinning against me, 7 times?” There’s that number again. Jesus makes his point as only Jesus can saying “Peter, yes, forgive him 7 times and not only 7 times but 77 times.” In other words, there is no end to how often you should forgive someone. And Jesus says later in Mark “have faith in God that your prayers will be answered but as you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone forgive them so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.” These are to name but a few. This first last word from the cross had been on his lips many times before.

If we ever believed it too great an ask from Jesus to offer forgiveness no matter what, we are soon silenced by how Jesus didn’t just teach it, he lived it and died for it - at a moment of grievous, grievous harm done to him, when he had all the right in the world as a totally innocent person NOT to forgive, being denied as

he was, betrayed, and executed, then he raised his voice from the cross and said “Father, forgive them.” There seems no doubt then, that if you accept Jesus as your savior, you must accept that forgiveness is essential. And if you are not sure about Jesus being God but you say you believe him to be a great and wise teacher, then there also the importance of forgiveness is central. At the heart of the Christian faith is Jesus’ heart of forgiveness.

Science works to answer the what of existence and the how of existence, but it’s religion that seeks to answer the why of existence; what is all this about, is there meaning in it all and if so where’s it all going? And our particular religion grapples with meaning by facing squarely suffering, brokenness and death in the world saying “yes, death, sin, and suffering is a real part of existence but it’s not meant to be so or at least it’s not meant to be the defining characteristic of existence and it’s certainly not final.” Unlike the bumper sticker - using a more colorful word than I will here - “stuff happens and then you die”, Christianity says stuff happens, humans mess up, pain and suffering are a part of reality and death occurs BUT something deeper and more hidden is happening behind the scenes, beneath the surface, beyond all that can be seen and grasped and understood and it’s a mighty stream of goodness, love, beauty, and a movement towards fulfillment and completion of all the good we’ve ever hoped for. It doesn’t make for quite such a pithy bumper sticker. And we believe that occasionally this stream comes bursting forth into the visible world, breaking through the material realm, and into history in order to move existence towards righting what is wrong and healing what is broken and completing what is undone. The two biggest moments of the stream breaking forth into history was in the revelation of God to the Jews and the revelation of God in and through and AS a particular Jew to the rest of humanity, Jesus the Christ.

In both breaking-forths, or revelations, one of the primary gestures in the Jewish story and the Jesus story is the human being being stuck in the constricting and diminishing consequences of waywardness and sin and being forgiven back into a more spacious place of love by God. It's a gesture or movement of transformation from the way things are in this world to the way things should be and forgiveness is a primary way its effected. God has built existence with natural and largely closed system of cause and effect but the human has the capacity to transcend cause and effect and open up a new vista towards life with a supernatural capacity to forgive, granted by the God who first forgave and ever forgives.

It's *supernatural* because it runs somewhat above and beyond what comes to us naturally, which would be "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth", at best. So our human waywardness and the way we sin and break what shouldn't be broken, which we all know in our lives, is met by God, we say as Christians not by the closed karmic system of crime and punishment but by the open-ended divine system of sin and forgiveness. And Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the cross and his proclamation of forgiveness – and the living of that forgiveness in his resurrected presence, I might add – that breaks open the human psyche and that karmic reality of "you reap what you sow" offering a brand new reality of redeemed creation, of "you reap God's grace and mercy". And through his power of forgiveness that opens up a new moment of creation, we are empowered to forgive others as well and open up this new reality.

It is central and critical and somehow one of THE prime moments of religious commitment and discipleship, of taking up our crosses and following Jesus, when we are locked in karmic cause and effect reality by being hurt by another that we can break it wide open through our own offer of forgiveness, even if it is not accepted, it is offered for what it means to us and maybe in some supernatural way what that means to the world.

Here's how the poet David Whyte speaks of it: "To forgive is to put oneself in a larger gravitational field of experience than the one that first seemed to hurt us. To forgive is to assume a larger identity for ourselves than the person we were when we were first hurt. We reimagine the past in light of a new identity, we allow ourselves to be gifted by a story larger than the story that first hurt us and left us bereft." The larger story that inspires in us forgiveness is the one of the innocent One on the cross. That forgiveness was the archetypal one offered for all human wrong so that when we are under the shadow of the cross with a sense of humble gratitude for what has been forgiven us, we are then inspired and called upon to suffer the forgiving of others. That it has to be *suffered* I'm not sure is really a question. This is not cheap grace, for as Paul says the wages of sin is death itself and for that to be overridden we've got to take on a certain suffering for the sake of others. That it feels like in given instances that we cannot forgive, should not be surprising and maybe ultimately the capacity to forgive is a grace given when finally we can put ourselves in and open up to a larger gravitational field of love where the narrow space of resentment and death and pain are holding sway. It is supernatural, for anyone who has witnessed it in others or experienced the capacity in their selves, it seems beyond our nature but comes nonetheless. For those locked in and unable to forgive, do not be surprised at how difficulty it can be and, maybe, ask for the grace, as a starting place to at least want to forgive and see where it goes from there. It could be exactly your cross to pick and bear forth.

Jesus speaks these first last words from the cross saying "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And this is the compassion that we offer in the gift of forgiveness, believing that if the other knew what they were doing, knew the hurt involved and suffering they were causing, and knew the true interconnectedness of them with us, they would never do what they did or are doing. It's deeply humble and profoundly hopeful. The humility comes from

acknowledging that we really are not as completely innocent nor the other as completely guilty as we'd like to believe it. And the hope comes in assuming the best of them even despite all evidence to the contrary that if they knew fully what they were doing they would not do it. How often do we know not what we do even with our very best of intentions. That humility and hope is strong enough to break open a new reality, a new gravitational field, a renewed creation which is why we pray this each Sunday, many of us every day – “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

With hands and feet pierced and his body bloodied by beatings, Jesus speaks from his first last word from the cross “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”