

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 23:26-34 *"Father, Forgive Them"*

Good Friday, we are taught, has to do with "the forgiveness of sins." I grew up in a liturgical church, hearing those phrases and others like them – that Jesus was "the Savior of the world," and so on – and I must admit that to a child these were very abstract ideas. Given that children have a very limited understanding of sin, it's not surprising that none of this language about forgiveness meant much to me in my early years.

By the time I was 18-20, of course, that changed. I now had a much clearer and more acute sense of what sin was, and carried plenty of guilt around with me. So I was ripe to meet preachers who told me that *I* was a sinner who needed the salvation and forgiveness that Jesus offered *me*. I embraced this idea with an evangelical fervor that I can still taste, and which in many ways has never left me. I thank God daily that I am forgiven, and pray for "a right spirit to be renewed within me."

So for a while I thought I had gained a much better grasp on this idea of forgiveness. Jesus had died not just "for the sins of the world," but for me too, and I was blessed that a gracious God forgave me my sins for Jesus' sake - now that I had some grasp of what confession and repentance meant, and had acquired or – better - been given, some measure of faith in Jesus the Christ.

But as 20s passed into 30s and 40s, I realized there was another dimension to forgiveness that I knew nothing about. I was called to forgive other people! And by now I had a list of hurts that other people had inflicted on me

or my family, and which cried out for – what? – revenge? Forgiveness? I couldn't figure out how to do either!

For a long time I wrestled with the question: *how* do you forgive someone? In my mind, and in the society I lived in, I heard expressions like "forgive and forget." But I couldn't forget, so I couldn't forgive! In fact I was falling into a well-known British behavior pattern of remembering hurts, nursing grievances, holding grudges, never forgetting, never forgiving! Until one day, by the grace of God, amid all the reading I was doing in spirituality and theology and Bible and ethics – I was not yet a minister, but it looked like some day I might be – one day I read an ethicist who told me "*forgiving has nothing to do with forgetting.*"

I was amazed. But he made a strong case. He said it was exactly the hurts that I could not forget that I needed to forgive – and that meant deciding that although I had really been hurt, and although the pain had not gone away, I would not let that stand in the way of a better future. Forgiving really was "moving on" – deciding to let go of my grievance, even if I could not make the pain go away – deciding to start on the process of making a better future relationship with the person who hurt me.

And that, I am thankful to say, has changed my relationships with a lot of people over the years. Now I know it's a matter of deciding that the future is not going to be held hostage by bad events in the past; that dwelling on and nursing memories only

makes them hurt longer, and that grudges form a tight coil around me if I hold on to them. In other words, I need to forgive for my own sake, as well as the sake of the person who hurt me!

So by now I'm thinking I have really grasped a lot about this thing called forgiveness. I'm forgiven by God, I know how to forgive other people. All very good, until I run into some behaviors that are truly unforgivable! It's not just that you can't forget these things, it's that they are repeated over and over, and cause not just hurt but deep harm – to you or to someone you love – and they are at times, humanly speaking, just unforgivable. Then, and only then, in my 60s, do I reach a point where for the first time, Jesus' words from the cross begin to truly mean something to me: *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."*

By the grace of God these words of Jesus sink down into my heart and I begin to appropriate them for myself. *"Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing."* Of course they don't. They are too young, they are easily misled, they are deluded about themselves; they are depressed, or psychotic, or obsessed, or drunk, or drugged. Their minds are not functioning properly. One day they will look back on all this, and say "what were we thinking?" Of course right now, I would like to hold them responsible for the carnage they are causing, but in reality they have very little idea what they are doing. *"Father, forgive them."* It softens my anger a lot, and slowly alters my judgment of many things in the world, as I begin to grasp that not everyone is morally culpable for everything they do.

And then I begin to see that this is how God must see much of our behavior. Yes, we commit knowing sins, deliberate sins, rebellious sins, as well as forgetful, self-preoccupied, sins of omission. But how much of what our Father has to forgive makes him shake his head, sigh a little, and say "they have no idea what they are doing"? Father, forgive us, for at times we don't know!

So have I now reached the end of the long trail in understanding forgiveness? I think not. Along the road I left some unresolved issues: like "forgiving myself" – do I need to do that more, or less? Then there's "forgiving God." When life doesn't turn out the way I hoped, or even prayed for, am I going to be angry with God – some people are, and it ruins the rest of their lives? Or am I going to remember who is God and who is not, and who knows what's really going on and who doesn't, and "forget it" – move on – that is, and "forgive God"? At least for the moment, one consequence of that struggle is that I have been able to drop the word *"why?"* from my vocabulary!

But what's next? What if God allows/makes something really painful happen to me or someone I love? Will I then readily and fully trust God, or get angry? And how about the gap that still exists in my soul between *"Father, forgive them"* and *"I forgive you."* Can I pray one without saying the other? Maybe I missed a point about *"forgive as the Lord forgave you."*

Oh, yes: *"Father, forgive them"* is not a prayer that Jesus alone could pray - Stephen, the first Christian martyr, prayed the same thing for the people who stoned him: *"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."* So forgiveness is something we disciples have to learn from our Lord, and there's more to it than we think!

So Father, forgive us, for we often do not know what we are doing – and help us, Father, to forgive others as you have forgiven us. That's a good prayer for a Good Friday.

Let us pray...