

FORGIVE THEM

CrossWords Series (Part 1)

Text: Luke 23:32-38

I

Have you ever stood at the bed of someone who was dying? If so, then you know how the prospect of imminent death has a way of surfacing someone's true substance. A person can go all through life wearing a veneer that conceals much of the true feelings and convictions that flow through the deep channels of his or her being; but when Death lays its axe to the trunk of a person's life, it is amazing how the sap of the soul comes seeping out.

Maybe that's why there's been so much fascination over the years with books like: *The Last Lecture*, or *When Breath Becomes Air*, or *Tuesdays With Morrie*. We're intrigued by the words of those whom the axe is striking. This is also why the final words of Jesus matter. You see, it is just possible that you could examine the whole life of Jesus up to the point of his death and not really know Him. All those good and challenging words he spoke, all those apparent acts of love and boldness, might have been just a veneer of nobility, just the polished surface of someone with a messiah-complex. You don't really know the character of a soul until it is struck by the sharp steel of suffering.

I'm sure the congregation that assembled at the foot of the Cross waited with bated breath to hear what Jesus would say. The soldiers who had lashed Him so savagely that the flesh literally hung in strips from his body -- they must have waited for him to cry out. After all, every one pinioned to the Cross before Him had done always done so. The historian, Seneca, tells us that people who were crucified typically cursed the day they were born, the mother that bore them, and the executioners who sat beneath the gallows gambling for the criminals' clothes.

Those who passed by on the road to Jerusalem would have expected a cry of torment too. So awful would be the exchanges between those on the cross and those who stopped to heckle, that the Roman statesman, Cicero, informs us it was sometimes necessary to cut out the tongues of the crucified, just to stop the blasphemies and the volleys of bloody spit the tormented often rained down on those below.

Yes, even the Scribes and Pharisees -- so eager to silence Jesus before -- must have been eager to hear what He would say now. Surely, He who had preached **Love your enemies [and] do good to those who hate you (Luke 6:27)** would abandon that ridiculous Gospel as the spikes sank into His flesh. Any resolution He had made to keep up appearances would quickly dissolve as blood from the crown of thorns began to sting His eyes... as his exhausted limbs shrieked in pain... as his chest heaved in an agonized struggle for air. Now it would be clear to all what Jesus was and was not.

Every one in that congregation expected a telling message to come from the lips of Jesus. But no one -- with the possible exception of the woman who'd born him, the whore to whom he'd extended grace, and the beloved disciple named John -- no one perhaps but these few -- were prepared for the words that actually came.

As I said, you don't truly know the character of a soul until it is struck by the savage blade of suffering. Yet the amazing thing about the seven last statements uttered by Jesus of Nazareth, is that we do not find in them a cry of Death in all its despair, but rather a call to Life in all its glory. To quote a great theologian: *"Like some fragrant trees which bathe in perfume the very axe which gnashes them, the great Heart on the Tree of Love poured out from its depths"*¹ some of the most beautiful, meaningful words ever spoken. For, even as he dies, Jesus shows us how to live. Take, for example, the first of the famous CROSSWORDS we'll be studying this Lenten season: **Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing (Luke 23:34).** Not a plea for vengeance but a gentle prayer of pardon.

II

There are at least three remarkable things about these words. The first, of course, is how UNNATURAL they are. I think in this regard Max Lucado reminds us of the balding, bespectacled man who, while riding a New York subway several years ago, was approached by four young hoodlums, who demanded his wallet. It was not an unusual scene; it's the sort of crime that had happened millions of times before and many times since. Only this time, the would-be victim calmly reached into his jacket, took out a pistol, and fired bullet after hot bullet into the bodies of his stunned accosters.

Almost overnight, Bernard Hugo Goetz became a household name -- a national hero. A major actress sent him a congratulatory letter. A rock group penned a song in his honor. T-shirts acclaiming the "Thug-Buster" sold out across the country. Money flooded in from all over to pay for his courtroom defense.² Why? Because people were tired of being hurt by people who should know better. They could identify with someone who got mad as you-know-what, and resolved that he was not going to take it anymore.

Can't you? Don't you get tired of people victimizing you? How many of you have secretly wished you had one of those James Bond cars with the headlight missiles for meting out justice to rude drivers!? What about those con-artists that have ripped you off? Or those people who say cruel things behind your back, thinking you'll never hear about it? What about those telephone spammers or the way the arrogant and pushy people bully the meek and polite of this world? Have you ever read about some murderer or molester that has savaged a human life as if it was worth nothing and just felt enraged? Felt like evening the score, taking revenge?

Those are *natural* emotions. What is *unnatural* is forgiveness in the face of such wrongs. It's just not natural for a victim to pity a victimizer and extend to him or her the grace of pardon. It's just not natural for you to forgive the people who brazenly hurt, or harass, or malign you. And what Jesus did on the Cross -- by saying "I forgive you" to his very executioners -- well, friends, I'm sorry, but that just blows the circuit-boards. Forgive Caiaphas the high-priest who allowed a soldier to strike you in the face with an armored fist? Forgive Pilate, the gutless politician who would send a man to death, though he knows he is innocent, just to protect his job? Forgive Herod, who would mock Absolute Wisdom by robing it in the clothes of a fool? Forgive Judas that backstabber or Peter that windbag turncoat? Forgive the soldiers, the hecklers, when He had given so much for them? Forgive when He was in that kind of pain? No, that kind of pardon is simply unnatural.

But, friends, it was more than unnatural. What makes Christ's first words on the cross even more amazing still is that the forgiveness he was extending was UNCONDITIONAL too. I mean, we might resonate with Jesus better if he'd said: "Father, forgive them, as long as they take me down right now and bandage me up." Or if he had said: "Father, forgive them, as long as they apologize; or as long as they feel terrible about what they have done." We can identify with *that* sort of forgiveness because that's the sort *we* typically extend. But not Jesus.

You see there is a third quality to the pardon Jesus extends to the vilest sinners in his time and ours that accounts for the first two qualities. The deepest kind of forgiveness is unnatural and unconditional precisely because it is so UNDERSTANDING. Well then, what does Jesus understand? He understands that his murderers and mockers *don't*. They don't get it. **"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."**

The great Roman Catholic pastor, Fulton J. Sheen, once put the truth this way: If Christ's killers "knew what they were doing and still went on doing it; if they knew what a terrible crime they were committing by sentencing Life to death; if they knew what a perversion of justice it was to choose Barrabas over Christ; if they knew what cruelty it was to take the feet that trod the everlasting hills [of heaven] and pinion them to an [earthly] tree... they would *never* be saved. In like manner, if *we* knew what a terrible thing sin was and went on sinning; if we knew how much love there was in the Sacrifice of the Cross and still refused to fill the chalice of our heart with that love;" if we knew what gigantic failings God has overlooked in our case, but still continued judging others for their foibles; if we knew all these things and still kept our lives from Christ and His Church, we should be utterly lost. For it is not our *wisdom* that saves us; it is our colossal *ignorance*! As Bishop Sheen remarks: "*It is only our ignorance of [how serious sin is and] how good God is that excuses us for not being saints.*"^b

Jesus forgives you and me because because in His divine and loving Wisdom He understands that we don't really know what we are doing. Now, that's not an argument for deliberately remaining ignorant, mind you, especially when you consider

that the forgiveness He offers us was finalized at the Cross. He's not going to take it back. Knowing that, it seems to me that you and I would be even more eager to repent of every vice and vanity in our lives, if only as a way of saying *"Thank you Jesus, for what you did to save me when I was just too blind to see."*

III

But doesn't the amazing grace of Jesus have an even larger impact on us than that? Doesn't it open up the possibility that you and I might just extend that kind of grace -- the kind that goes against human nature, the kind that extends pardon without conditions -- to someone else? I mean when your marriage partner treats you coldly, or when your kids break your heart and hopes; when some slimy competitor or client rips you off, or when even Christian friends fail you in some painful way; when a salesclerk treats you rudely, or some slob steals your parking space; when that person from the other party says that unconscionable thing, is it possible for you and me to do more than simmer with anger, sealing off our hearts, or plot to get even?

As the hero in the movie, *Schindler's List*, says so eloquently: *"The greatest power of all is not the power to exact judgment; it is the power to pardon."* And though the person he spoke to couldn't quite believe it, I know it's true. I know it because I saw that power once. I saw it flowing from the wounds that Evil's axe had made in Him who was the Tree of Life itself. Never will you or I have more good reason than HE did to render evil for evil. Yet I heard Him saying something to me and to you that now I think maybe you and I could say more too. He said: **"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."** With his dying breaths, Jesus gave us words we can live by. The question He asks is: "Will YOU?"

Let us pray...

Loving God, we confess that there is little or nothing in our human nature that makes it natural to forgive those who have wronged us, and less still that makes it easy to offer that grace without setting conditions by which it will be given. Yet knowing with what amazing understanding you have looked upon our ignorance of our own sin, and extended to us a pardon we hardly even know we need, we ask you to pour into us something of that divine nature we see in Christ upon the Cross. May the dawning knowledge of our own blindness make us extraordinarily patient with the sins of those we'll meet this week. For this we pray in the name of the Savior who spoke those words of life: "Thou art forgiven. Go and sin no more." Amen.

¹Fulton J. Sheen, *The Seven Last Words: The Message from the Cross*. Garden City Books: Garden City, New York, 1933.

²Thanks to Max Lucado for this view of the Bernard Goetz story.

³*Op. Cit.*, pp. 5-8.