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Sermon: “Father, Forgive Them” (Luke 23:34)

Palm Sunday: March 28, 2010

Each year as we read an account of the passion of Jesus Christ on Palm Sunday I am overwhelmed, overwhelmed by the love of God for us. The passion of Jesus Christ reminds us that the Almighty Creator and Sustainer of the universe loves us more than we could ever imagine. At the Last Supper Jesus told His disciples, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13), and as we just read, the very next day he did just that in his death on the cross for us. Scripture tells us that Jesus’ death on the cross is the ultimate proof of God’s love for us: “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). God loves us, and he died to prove it.

When I was a kid I had a clock radio in my room and it was on most of the time. In 1977 an English band called 10cc had a big hit with their song, “The Things We Do for Love.” (It was later covered by Amy Grant in the 90’s and covered again in the recent Nickelodeon TV musical, *Spectacular!* (Your kids know what I’m talking about). The song begins:

Too many broken hearts have fallen in the river
Too many lonely souls have drifted out to sea
You lay your bets and then you pay the price
The things we do for love, the things we do for love

Jesus died on the cross for you because he loves you. Jesus paid the price. His death was a thing he did for love, for love of you.

Each of the four New Testament accounts of the passion of Jesus Christ contains some unique emphases on the love of Jesus Christ expressed in his passion. Luke’s account, which we just read, is only one which records what Jesus said immediately after he was nailed to the cross: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (23:34).

Jesus has been up all night. He has been betrayed by Judas, abandoned by his disciples, and falsely accused of blasphemy. He has been turned over by the leaders of his own people, the Jews, into the hands of their oppressors, the Romans. He has been mocked and beaten. He has been so severely flogged that he was barely recognizable, his back shredded by the flagellum with which he had been whipped thirty-nine times. He has had a purple robe wrapped around the bleeding remnants of his back and then ripped off. He has had a crown of thorns pounded into his head. He has been punched and kicked and spit on. He has been forced to carry the instrument of his own death to the place of his own death. He has been thrown on his back, stretched out, and had large iron nails pounded through his wrists and feet to secure him to the cross. Throughout all of this he has heard people jeer him and hurl insult after insult at him.

And what does Jesus say to his tormentors at that moment? Nothing. Nothing at all. Instead, Jesus calls out to his Heavenly Father. And what does Jesus ask for? Does he ask for the suffering to stop? Does he ask his Father to smite the tormentors? Does he ask for strength for

himself? No. Jesus asks his Father to forgive them. Jesus asks his Father to forgive the disciples with whom he had walked for three years and before whom he had performed miracle after miracle. Jesus asks his Father to forgive the Jewish leaders who falsely accused him of blasphemy. Jesus asks his Father to forgive the Romans who mocked him and inflicted unspeakable pain and suffering on him.

But it goes past that, because in praying, “Father, forgive them,” Jesus is also asking his Father to forgive you and me for every evil thought, every mean word, every selfish act, every besetting sin, every expression of hate, every grudge, every outburst of anger, every twisted motive, every expression of smug self-righteousness, every skeleton in our closet—in short, every sin in our lives, “known and unknown, things done and left undone” (BCP 393)—all of it.

As Jesus is in the midst of suffering that you and I cannot even begin to comprehend, he asks his Father to forgive those who crucified him, which includes not only the Jewish leaders who handed him over and the Roman soldiers who fixed him to the cross, but you and me as well. The second verse of Hymn 158 in our hymnal captures this, “Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee? Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee. Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee: I crucified thee.”

Immediately after being nailed to the cross, Jesus prays, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

Jesus was right. We do not what we are doing. If we’re honest, we have to admit that we have very little understanding of the extent of the sin in our hearts. C. S. Lewis, author of *The Chronicles of Narnia* and many other classic books describes this in his book, *Surprised by Joy*. Listen to what Lewis admits was in his heart: “For the first time I examined myself with a serious practical purpose. And there I found what appalled me: a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds. My name was legion.” And those same things are in all our hearts, as Jesus himself said, “For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander” (Matthew 15:19).

We might think we’re doing the right thing by following our heart, but often we are not. When King David, Israel’s greatest king, followed his heart, it led to adultery and murder, which is why after he repented he prayed, “Create in me a clean heart, O God” (Psalm 51:11, BCP 657). Following our hearts leads us into trouble, because, as Jesus prayed, we do not know what we’re doing.

But the good news of the gospel is that although we may not know what we are doing, God does.

And when Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing,” God answered that prayer. Even though we didn’t know what we were doing, God knew exactly what he was doing; for Jesus’ death on the cross paid the price for all the sins ever committed anywhere, anytime. Article XXXI of the Thirty-nine Articles, the classic summation of Protestant Anglican doctrine puts it this way: “The Offering of Christ once made is that perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction, for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual; and there is none other satisfaction for sin, but that alone” (BCP 874).

Jesus' death on the cross was enough to atone for the sins of the world because Jesus Christ is who John the Baptist said he is, "the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

Scripture tells us: "If we confess our sins, (God) who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from *all* unrighteousness" (I John 1:9), and we are reminded of this every single week during the absolution after the confession:

7:45 and 11:00—"Almighty God... pardon and deliver you from *all* your sins... through Jesus Christ our Lord" (BCP 332).

9:00 and 5:00—"Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you *all* your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ" (BCP 360).

When we confess our sins and receive God's forgiveness, what does God do with our sins? The Old Testament gives us many images of what God's forgiveness of our sins looks like. Through the prophet Isaiah God said, "I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud, and your sins like mist" (Isaiah 44:22). Isaiah also tells us that God has cast all our sins behind his back (Isaiah 38:17). Through the prophet Jeremiah God assures us, "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31:34). The Psalmist tells us, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has (God) removed our sins from us" (Psalm 103:12, BCP 734). The prophet Micah assures us, "(God)... will tread our iniquities under foot" and "will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:19)—an image I found particularly poignant when I was on a ship once in the Caribbean Sea, staring at the sea, thanking God for his mercy in my life.

Jesus endured the passion we read today so that we could be forgiven of our sins, all of them, every single one of them, and he did this because he loves us, as the Apostle John wrote, "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (I John 4:10).

When Jesus in the midst of the agony of crucifixion prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing," God answered that prayer because God loves us. The death of Jesus on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins is a thing God did for love.

This gives us hope now, and hope in the face of death. The gospel is a life and death issue of eternal consequence. As 19th century Anglican Bishop J. C. Ryle put it, "When you come to your deathbed, you will want something more than an example and a sacrament."

All this is captured in the fourth of John Donne's *Holy Sonnets*. John Donne was an English poet and priest who was the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London during the last ten years of his life from 1621-1631. He often wrote of the hope God gives us in Christ, especially in the face of death, a hope to which he clung through the death of his beloved 18 year old daughter, Lucy, a hope to which he clung as he approached his own death. Listen to what he writes about the power of God's forgiveness in *Holy Sonnet IV*:

O, my black soul, now thou art summoned
By sickness, Death's herald and champion;
Thou'rt like a pilgrim, which abroad hath done
Treason, and durst not turn to whence he's fled;
Or like a thief, which till death's doom be read,
Wisheth himself deliver'd from prison,
But damn'd and haled to execution,
Wisheth that still he might be imprisoned.
Yet grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lack;
But who shall give thee that grace to begin?
O, make thyself with holy mourning black,
And red with blushing, as thou art with sin;
Or wash thee in Christ's blood, which hath this might,
That being red, it dyes red souls to white.

It is Jesus Christ who endured his passion on our behalf because he loves us. It is Jesus Christ who gives us “grace to begin,” whose death on the cross assures us of God’s forgiveness, whose blood alone “dyes red souls to white.” The passion of Jesus Christ is the ultimate thing God did for love.

Let us pray...