

Streetsville United Church  
Friday, April 2, 2010  
Rev. John Tapscott

"FATHER, FORGIVE THEM"

Luke 23:34

It shouldn't surprise us that Jesus first word from the cross was this, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34) For the whole reason Jesus came was so to save us from our sins. Even before he was born, the angel instructed Joseph, "You shall name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

These words, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," have been called the most sublime words ever uttered. Consider the circumstances. Death by crucifixion is one of the worst forms of capital punishment ever devised. No criminal figures on getting caught. But for those who were caught and sentenced to die, it was a terrible death. People shuddered not only at the sight, but even the thought of it. The pain of crucifixion was excruciating and often the crucified person didn't die for a few days. Jesus died quickly because he had been beaten so badly and lost a great deal of blood. But often a man hung stark naked on a cross for a few hot days and cold nights before his heart finally gave out. Vultures gathered even before the man died. Now you say, "Some deserved to die, murderers, thieves, insurrectionists, rapists." But what about Jesus? He had done nothing wrong. And yet from the lips of this innocent man came these words, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

*Here's the first thing to understand. Jesus was praying for us.*

The "them" and the "they" are a bit ambiguous, deliberately so, perhaps. Just before this Luke writes, "They crucified him..." So Jesus was praying for the soldiers who were following orders and really didn't know what they were doing. But he was also praying for the religious and political authorities who conspired to kill him and for those who shouted "crucify him." He was praying for Peter who denied him and for the rest of the apostles who fled. He prayed for all these.

And that means he was praying for us, too. For we are all involved in the sins that put the Lord of Glory to death. I ask myself, "Would I have been there to the very end? Would I have said a good word for Jesus at his trial? Would I have been like Peter and the others - seeking to save myself from what Jesus was going through? Sadly, I would have been like them. Then I ask myself, have I ever compromised to keep the peace, like Pilate? Yes I have, in my own little realm of influence. Have I ever taken what didn't belong to me? Have I ever betrayed someone for personal gain, like Judas? Have I ever acted in self-interest? Have I ever gone along with the crowd, even when I knew better? Yes, I'm afraid I've done all these. The people who put Jesus to death were just like you and me. All of us were there when our Lord was crucified. We all took the hammer in hand and had a swing at the nail. We are all implicated in the sin of this world - the world

that could take the best who ever walked the earth, and nail him to a cross.

And the problem with sin, disobeying God, is that we really don't know what we are doing. Now we are responsible for sin, but we never grasp the full implications of it. There is no such thing as a little sin. One lie is told, another has to be told to cover the first, and another, and it just gets out of control. We've been following the Jordan Manners murder case. Because witnesses changed their story, the jury apparently decided they couldn't believe their original story even if it was true. And so two murderers may go free. From Adam and Eve onward sin has consequences we can't foresee. Sin separates us from our Holy God; it separates us from other people; it disfigures us inwardly and outwardly, And even if we think we get away with it, someone else suffers because of it. It's like the person who crosses against a light in heavy traffic. They might get across with no harm done, this time. Or they might get across safely because cars slam on the brakes and get into an accident. In that case, someone else pays for their wrong-doing. So it is that sin, even little sin, always has unforeseen consequences.

When Jesus prayed "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do", he was praying not just for those around the cross; he was also praying for you and me.

*Here's the second thing to see. This is a prayer the Father answers.*

In fact, Jesus was dying to make it possible for the Father to answer that prayer. God longs to forgive us and will forgive us when the price for our sin is paid. You see, sin incurs a debt which can only be paid by death. And the only way we could pay our sin debt is to die and be separated from God forever. Sadly, some people will choose to do it that way. But God doesn't want that to happen and it doesn't have to happen. For the Father sent his Son to pay the price for us. John writes, "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins." For a few brief hours as Jesus died, the Father and the Son were separated. The Father had to turn away as Jesus became sin for us, bearing the curse and paying the price. It was just as painful for the Father as it was for the Son. Both suffered.

But when he raised Jesus from the dead, the Father showed that his obedient Son's prayer had been answered. "Father, forgive them." And God did. God reconciled the world to himself, pouring out forgiveness for all. And this forgiveness becomes real in all of us who come to God by faith in Jesus.

During the U.S. Civil War a woman was sitting on a park bench in Washington, crying. Her son, under great stress, had deserted his post and was soon to be shot by a firing squad. The mother had come to the capitol to see President Abraham Lincoln, but couldn't get past the front gates of the White House. One day, a boy sat down beside this woman and asked why she was so distressed. She said that if only she could talk to the President, she knew her Son would be pardoned. The boy asked the woman to follow him. When they came to the White House Gate, the boy said to the guards, "It's all right;

she's with me." The woman followed in amazement. They came to the Oval Office, where Lincoln was seated at his desk. The boy said, "Dad, there's a woman here to see you. She needs your help." After hearing the story the President gave the woman's son a presidential pardon.

The point is that she had access to the President through the President's Son. So we have access to God the Father through the Son. When put our trust in Jesus, Jesus prays for us, "Father, forgive them." And the Father always answers his Son's prayer on our behalf. He forgives the sins we confess and even those which can't confess because we're not even aware of them. But they're all forgiven.

Have you received God's forgiveness through his Son? There is great joy in receiving God's forgiveness. It's like the little boy whose father would be away for a few days on sales trips. On one of these trips the boy's behaviour at home was not so good. On the night his father was coming home, his mother told him to go and wait in his room. "Just wait 'til you Father gets home," she said. So there he waited. He heard his father come in the door and the muffled voices of his parents discussing his situation. He could bear it no longer and figured he might as well meet his punishment half-way and started down the stairs. When his father saw him he ran to him, and said, 'My own dear son,' hugging him warmly. And the boy never forgot the joy of that moment, the joy of being forgiven and made right with his Father. When we come to God in the name of Jesus a miracle of grace happens. Jesus prays, "Father, forgive," and God does. God surrounds us with mercy and says, "You are my own dear son, my own dear daughter. You are forgiven. You are mine forever."

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Jesus is praying for you and for me. And it's a prayer the Father answers because Jesus died and rose again and makes intercession for us.

Finally, we must ask this. *As those who are forgiven by God through Christ, what kind of people ought we to be and become?*

Well, for one thing we ought to learn to hate sin. Now not one of us is perfect. We will never completely conquer sin in this life, but thankfully the blood of Christ covers all our sin and makes us acceptable to God forever. We don't become holier than thou because we know our constant need for grace. But we do not sit lightly to sin or laugh at it. At the Cross we see what sin can do. We know that it has consequences far beyond the immediate act. So we learn to hate sin, to resist it, and to embrace obedience to God.

Secondly, as those who are forgiven by God through Jesus Christ we seek with the Spirit's help to be forgiving people. We seek to be infected with the loving and forgiving heart of the one who prayed, "Father, forgive them" A couple of weeks ago I cut from the newspaper the report of the funeral service of OPP Constable Vu Pham who was murdered in the line of duty.

Here's how the article from the Toronto Star begins - (H)er voice quivering, the wife of a slain OPP officer said she will struggle to forgive the man who shot the father of her three sons. "As hard as it is, I believe forgiveness is the only way to release the pain and the anger," Heather Pham said at the funeral of her husband. "God has freely offered us forgiveness," she said at the packed sports arena where her husband coached their sons in hockey. "To the best of my human ability, with God's help, I will offer it as well. My hope and prayer is that all of you will do the same. I know that's what Vu would have wanted."

Look, I know that forgiving others is hard, and can take a long time to do, and don't beat yourself up if you can't do it now, but pray to God for that day to come. As those who are forgiven by God through Jesus Christ, we have a bias toward forgiveness. We follow Him who said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Finally, as those forgiven by God through Jesus Christ, we can forgive ourselves. Some people have a hard time with this. They've received God's forgiveness through Christ, they've been gracious in forgiving others, but they haven't forgiven themselves completely. The Bible tells us that as forgiven people, God has forgotten our sins and thrown them into the depths of the sea. But some of us keep digging them up and beating ourselves up over them. "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." Remember that Jesus is praying for you. And the Father answers his prayer on your behalf. You are forgiven and you have permission to forgive yourself. So be gracious to yourself. Make this a Good Friday. Forgive yourself as God has forgiven you.