

**West Valley Presbyterian Church
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Father Forgive Them For They Know Not What They Do

There was a woman Beverly who came to see me once, who as a child never heard her father say those all important three words “I love you”. Not once did he express his affection. In fact he was a strict man and very demanding. As he grew older he was diagnosed with an aggressive type of cancer and his strength began to wane. Despite treatment his health deteriorated rapidly and hospice moved in. In the last few hours family gathered around but Beverly couldn’t get there right away as she lived on the East Coast. When Beverly did arrive she walked into the room and seeing that his eyes were closed she grabbed his hand. Dad I’m here, she said. Her father opened his eyes. He looked at her steadily... And then, through dry lips he mouthed the words, “I love you” and then a few moments later he drifted away. The only time he had ever said it, but it was enough.

The *last words* of someone are so often words that reveal the most about a person, their true heart and often their last words are about what matters most.

So for the next seven Sundays we are going to be looking at the *last words of Jesus*. These are the seven last words/phrases that he spoke from the cross as he was dying. And these words reveal a lot to us about the heart of God for the world, and about the essence of who Jesus was. Each of these words that Jesus spoke from the cross were probably extremely painful for him to articulate.

Crucifixion, as you probably know, was a terrible way to die - it was so bad it was reserved for only the worst criminals. Before Jesus was crucified he was beaten with whips designed by the Romans to tear human flesh. He was mocked, and a crown of thorns was pressed down on his brow and he was humiliated. The act of carrying ones own cross through the city was a way to humiliate someone - and then as nails were pounded into his hands and feet he was cursed and belittled by the crowd that looked on.

The whole of act of crucifixion was a type of torture. Being nailed to a cross forced the person to rise up - pulling themselves up with their

arms to allow the diaphragm and chest wall muscles to relax to let the air out.. Presumably, on the cross one would have to pull up with the arms to breathe out, and breathing in would become passive and occur when relaxing from pulling up with the arms. Finally when the victims lost the strength to do that, and slumped over they were asphyxiated. So these last words of Jesus are very important because they came at great pain and expense as he struggled to speak them.

Today the phrase of Jesus that we are going to focus on are the words. **“Father Forgive Them For They Know Not What They Do”**

OK. Now think about that statement. The first thing I want you to realize is that **1. This pronouncement of forgiveness comes *while* Jesus is being tortured.** This statement comes not *after* the offense has been committed and Jesus has had time to think about it all, and kind of calm down and gain perspective. You know sometimes when I am slighted, or someone hasn't been very kind, I get mad and then after I think about it a little more I calm down, and I say to myself...I need to forgive this person. I shouldn't react in anger. I need to realize what is going on in me, and how I am contributing. I sort of step back to see

how I am contribution to the situation. And this has to do with small personal slights, everyday kinds of issues and misunderstandings.

But Jesus states this phrase of forgiveness from the agony of the cross, lifting himself up – probably arching forward - in order to exhale and gasp out words of forgiveness, that set his tormentors free. And in his twisted and tortured condition, **Jesus forgives as it is all happening to him.** He forgives **as he is being brutalized.** He forgives **as they throw dice** for his clothing...which would be like selling raffle tickets for a dying persons will in front of them before they expire. He forgives **as he is humiliated, hanging there naked.** These were powerful words that rocked heaven and earth. I wonder...would the thief on the cross have asked Jesus to remember him in paradise if Jesus had not pronounced this statement of forgiveness for him? Would the centurion have said *Surely this was the Son of God* had Jesus withheld these words? Forgiveness sets captives free.

Second 2. Jesus is operating as both the sacrifice for our sins, and the high priest or advocate who intercedes for us. Both things are happening at once and Scripture is full of these kinds of paradoxes when it comes to the sacrifice of Christ. Jesus, at this communion table is both the host and the meal. *On the cross he is both the sacrifice and the*

one who intercedes for us – our advocate, our friend, our defender. He is defending those who torture him. He is advocating to God for those who are killing him. What kind of love is this? You know, I never had too much to do with high priests but we've had lawyers from time to time. And the relief of knowing that someone else is going to stand in the gap and defend your case to a judge is enormous. But I had to pay that lawyer a buck or two, when they did that. Lawyers often demand a steep price. Here Jesus prays for us as we are brutally taking his life away, intercedes for us as he is also paying the price by dying for us. "They don't know what they are doing"...is his statement. It's like a lawyer saying to the judge "This offense is criminal but the person wasn't in their right mind. Let them off." So here Jesus is both the sacrifice for our sins, and the one who intercedes for us – our advocate, or high priest.

Third 3. **The word "Father" in Jesus' appeal as he gasps out forgiveness is significant.** First off of course is the closeness that he has with Almighty God – he has been using the word Father to refer to God since the time he was a boy. When he was only 12 years old, no one can find Jesus anywhere. His parents are frantically looking for him. They find him in the temple and he says to them, "Didn't you know I'd be

in my Father's house?" He taught his disciples to pray the Lord's Prayer that starts out how? *Our Father...* you see Jesus didn't hold his close relationship with God as a special privilege just for him. God as father, loving parent, was a title meant for all of us. And he addresses God as Father from the cross almost as if to say, YOU ARE FATHER – not just of me – but of these your people who are killing your beloved son. These are your children. Forgive them...Father of all. Remember these are your children too– and they are stupid children, children that don't what they are doing. Don't hold it against them. Forgive them.

4. In this statement of forgiveness we see the heart of God revealed. Richard Rohr said that, **"Everytime God forgives us...it tells us that his rules are not as important as the relationship he wants to have with us."**

And the healing of our relationship with God is what Jesus came to accomplish. The mending of that rupture, the stitching up of that gap that our sins (sins translated means..."missing the mark" – like an archer who misses the bulls eye)..the goal...the purpose...the direction" God has for us. Our constant missing the mark has fueled our own self destruction, pulled us into idolatry, and made us so disconnected from

our Creator that we kill Jesus, the messenger, the Author of Life, the Son of God, the One who loves with an everlasting love. The One our hearts truly long for, the One who could fulfill us, and heal us, and bring us peace, we are bent on destroying. ***We Know not what we do.*** But...in the words Father Forgive Them...there is still hope, there's the possibility of a new day, a resurrection morning, another chance, a better way despite our darkness. These words reveal to us the deep, unrelenting mercy and compassion at the core of God's heart, and his stubborn resolve to never give up on us.

So please understand today, if you haven't understood it before, understand it now...the grace of God is not a grace that extends itself thinly and with mild reserve, all while passing quiet judgment...hoping that we will shape up the next time. I used to think that. I used to have God in my mind as one who handed out forgiveness in demi tasse cups. Sort of like little communion cups. I want you to know that I am all for little cups. We are Presbyterian and we are into symbols...a little water when we baptize...not the whole Baptist deal...immersion...we get it...we don't need all the mess, or a mop crew. And communion..we get that we're forgiven...all we need is a sip of a reminder.

But I remember an exercise that was done at a pastor's retreat – that was very significant for me - where for communion each of us was given a whole loaf of really good bread...and whole goblet of juice or wine (we could choose) It was MORE than enough. And we were told to go off by yourself and eat as much bread as you want, and have an abundance of juice or wine and allow the magnificence and breadth of God's forgiveness to sink deep inside us. And that day I was so blessed by God's abundant mercy...Under the trees with the sun slanting sideways casting long elegant shadows in the late afternoon, holding my enormous loaf of bread and my goblet full to the brim, I had a new awareness of the enormity of God's love...We don't have a God who parcels out favors to us with stingy reserve. A God who raises his eyebrows and says *"Tsk, tsk...you really did blow it, didn't you. Well...okay I'll let it go...one last time....but really..you are a definite disappointment."* That's not how God does it. That's us...we give out grace hesitantly sometimes...with a bit of judgment thrown in, a pinch of superiority perhaps, a slice of fear because if the person messes up again we're afraid we won't have the emotional energy to handle it..and on and on we go with our limited capacities. But God's forgiveness is

abundant – completely different from ours. On a whole other scale and comes from a source of abundance, not scarcity.

I remember a joke about a man who had a friend who was a billionaire. And the billionaire really loved this man Ted, his friend, so one day when it was Ted's birthday the billionaire asked, "Ted, what can I get you for your birthday? You have been a great friend to me and I want you to know how much I appreciate you." And Ted thought for a moment and said, "Well if you really want to know, I would love a new golf club." "You got it." Said his friend. On the day of his birthday Ted received a FEDEX envelope. When Ted opened the envelope there was a certificate that said, "Congratulations! You are the proud owner of a 250 acre Golf Club complete with restaurant, supply store and free parking." What a difference in perspective!

The grace of Gods forgiveness is so other than human forgiveness...it is on such a different scale. We just cannot compare it to what we know of human forgiveness that so often comes in its fragile, stingy, conditional wrapping...God's forgiveness is nothing like that...Rather...Divine forgiveness comes into our lives like a mighty wave of mercy that bowls us over with the strength and ardor of its compassion, and the force of a

love that will not let us go. It is a grace that insists that we live, and that we connect meaningfully and deeply with our Creator. It is a forgiveness that overwhelms us so that we can see that our sins are powerless to hold us down. It plunges us into an ocean of mercy, it challenges our small minded stingy tunnel visioned perspective with the vastness of Gods grace that is not at all threatened by the darkness of our self destructive sins; but rather that love is so strong and wise that it is not afraid to painfully and willfully sacrifice itself on our behalf completely... the source of all life is never threatened by the darkness of death.

Today, the worst thing you can do is to stay unresponsive to this God who calls out to you to accept the wealth of his forgiveness. The God of the cross took your sins on himself because the God of the cross thought you were worth saving, even when it meant torture. The God of the cross gasped out "Father forgive them" – so don't despise that prayer from Jesus. After confession today, Don't carry the burden of your sins anymore – the guilt, the shame, the pain of them – God doesn't remember them– why should you? Or maybe its despair, or lack of hope you carry; maybe it's a sense of loss that is weighing you down. But no matter what you've done, or how long its been, whatever is in the closet that you don't want to talk about, or whatever pain you are carrying – no

matter what it is - he took it on himself that day. That means if you ask to be forgiven in Jesus' name, or ask to be relieved of a heavy burden... the slate is wiped clean, and the burdens can be left right here – All God asks for in return is your heart today. That's all he wants. The sense that you must measure up, try harder, be better to win God's favor - none of that makes any sense because all of our righteous acts are as filthy rags anyway, the Scripture says, so just forget about that.....Rather, as you come to this table today, confess your sins, and then don't take them back – rather receive the cleansing and refreshment of his forgiveness – let his forgiveness release you from bondage, and open your eyes to his grace..Thank God for these last words of Christ that give us a new beginning, a fresh start – his mercies are new every morning... \Friends, believe the good news of the gospel today.... In Jesus Christ...our advocate, friend, high priest, intercessor and perfect sacrifice, you are forgiven.