

## **“The Power of Forgiveness”**

**Luke 23:26-34**

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Frankfort, Kentucky

February 4, 2018

### **Communion Devotion**

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34a)

There are no words that adequately describe the impact this prayer has had upon many who have read it, including me. It haunts and humbles me.

Often, when I try to justify my impulsive reaction to someone who has hurt me, a response that usually makes a bad situation worse, this prayer gets in my way. It has spoiled many pity-parties and made childish tirades look foolish.

Who voiced this prayer and under what conditions? What did he hope to accomplish by praying for those who were mistreating him? Why did Luke or his followers feel compelled to include it in this gospel, something no other writers chose to do?

Let’s take a few minutes to answer these questions as we prepare our hearts and minds for communion.

**Who voiced this prayer and under what conditions?** This prayer belongs to Jesus, and he prayed it while hanging on the cross. He pleaded with God to forgive those who were responsible for crucifying him.

This included the people who demanded that Pilate release Barabbas and crucify Jesus.

This included the Roman authorities who reluctantly ordered his execution because they lacked the courage of their convictions.

This included the soldiers who beat, tortured, humiliated, mocked, sneered at and insulted Jesus during his trial, scourging and crucifixion.

This included the religious leaders who orchestrated Jesus' arrest and crucifixion because his courageous and prophetic voice exposed their self-indulgence, lust for power, corruption and hypocrisy.

This included his own disciples who either betrayed, denied or abandoned him.

While some were not as innocent as others and bore a greater amount of responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus, I believe all were included in this prayer for forgiveness. Jesus became an advocate for all of them at that moment.

**Why did Jesus pray this prayer?** How could he possibly appeal to God to forgive all these people who broke his heart and his body?

How could he not do it may be the more appropriate question. Forgiveness was a major theme of Jesus' ministry, which Luke highlighted throughout his gospel. Five times in this gospel, Jesus instructed his disciples to forgive their enemies.

"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hurt you, bless those who curse you and pray for those who mistreat you." (Luke 6:27-28)

I suppose Jesus really believed what he taught, didn't he?

The question is, do we?

**Why is forgiveness such an important part of our faith?** Perhaps it is because one of the things we all have in common is that we are sinners.

For this reason, it is impossible to overestimate the importance of forgiveness in healthy relationships. None of us is perfect, which means all of us say and do things that undermine our relationships. Without forgiveness, these relationships will not survive.

**What is forgiveness?** Let me begin with what it is not.

Forgiveness is not ignoring what someone has done to hurt you and neither is it minimizing the pain you feel from their behavior. This is denial.

Forgiveness is choosing to value the person who has disappointed you more than your right to be angry at their unfaithfulness. Forgiveness says to the person who has offended you, "I can't erase what you have done and the pain you have caused me, but I can choose to embrace the possibility of transcending them and repairing this broken relationship. So, I am committed to restoring this relationship in the midst of the pain I feel. Will you work with me?"

When people and the relationship we have with them become more important to us than harboring feelings of resentment and seeking revenge, then forgiveness can occur. It is not that these negative feelings and desires go away. We feel them every day in the beginning, but we refuse to let them control our response, eliminating all hope for reconciliation.

The process of forgiveness, and it is a process, breaks the vicious cycle of anger, hatred, resentment, hostility and violence so prevalent in society, beginning in our homes. It paves the way for achieving reconciliation and healing broken relationships.

Forgiveness makes starting over and beginning again possible, something we all need to do periodically. When someone who has wronged another sees the sacrifices that person is making on their behalf, knowing they don't deserve it, the potential for changes in their behavior and a new path forward increases dramatically.

This is why the call to follow Jesus is a call to forgive. The power forgiveness unleashes in a marriage, a family, a classroom, a workplace, a church and a neighborhood melts hearts, changes lives, restores relationships and builds healthy communities.

Richard Rohr, an American Franciscan friar and inspirational speaker and author, reminds us in his book, Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps, "God does not love us IF we can change. God loves us SO we can change."

Love precedes change. Change occurs when someone chooses love over hate. It's that simple.

What I love about this prayer Jesus prayed on the cross is that it teaches us it possible to love people at their worst. In a culture that prides itself on trading love with those who like us and those who are like us, this message needs to be heard.

The gospel does not merely call us to trade love with those who are good to us, but it demands that we give love away to those who have done nothing to deserve it. We don't extend grace to others because of who they are but because of who we are. We are disciples of Jesus who are passionate about healing wounds and repairing relationships.

This is not all we are passionate about, but it is one of our highest priorities. The goal of all who pursue justice is to redeem and to restore the fallen and to bring them back into the fold.

Mercy and grace are the bedrock of our faith. They are released to do their redemptive work when we pray, "Father, forgive them."

It is common for people to confide in me how hard it is to forgive someone who has hurt them. Sometimes they sound surprised when they say it, as if it just dawned on them that there is no easy way to forgive someone.

Deep down, all of us wish forgiving others was easy. At times, we deceive ourselves by thinking it will get easier if we wait awhile.

It rarely does. This is because forgiving someone who has wronged us is contrary to human nature.

Forgiveness is not the usual response to betrayal, broken promises, bullying, abuse or mistreatment of any kind. Retaliation is.

Jesus repeatedly condemned this reaction, didn't he? He said it would only make a bad situation worse. This is why he called for his disciples to forgive their enemies and to seek a path forward that would heal the wounds of both the victim and the offender, bringing estranged people together.

Corrie ten Boom and her family were Dutch Christians who helped many Jews escape the Holocaust of WW II. When their home was invaded after an informant tipped off the Nazis of their activities, the family was imprisoned. Corrie's sister, Betsie, and her father, Casper, died in captivity.

When a guard once told Corrie the only way to survive in a horrible place like a concentration camp was to hate, it is reported she replied, "Sir, hatred will put me in a prison far worse than this."

Are you in that self-imposed prison now? Would you like to leave it?

The first step can occur this morning if you will take this bread and cup from the nail-pierced hands of Jesus and pray the prayer he prayed on the cross... "Father, forgive them."