

McCabe United Methodist Church
Final Words (Part 1): “*Father, Forgive Them*”
Luke 23:26, 33-34
February 23 & 24, 2013
Pastor Rick Fossum

Today, we begin a new series where we take a look at Jesus and the six hours he spent on the cross. During this series, we'll be talking about the '*seven last words*' that Jesus spoke from the cross during those six hours. Actually, it's more accurate to call them the '*seven last statements*' of Jesus rather than words.

One of our resources will be a book by Adam Hamilton called the Final Words.

The four Gospels don't agree on the seven last statements of Jesus. Matthew and Mark both report that Jesus made one statement from the cross. In Luke, we find three statements not found in the other gospels. And in John, we find three more statements for a grand total of seven.

I don't think that's a problem because each Gospel writer was writing their own version of what happened. It's like you and I were a witness to a car accident. You were standing on one corner while I was standing on another corner. You saw the accident from your vantage point and I saw it from mine. It was the same accident, but we each saw it from different angles making our stories a bit different, but still true. In that way, I believe that the four Gospels, while they don't all agree about what Jesus actually said, they do complement each other.

We also don't know the exact order that these seven last statements were spoken. What did Jesus say first or second? We don't know. For this series, we'll be using the traditional order.

Today, we'll look at the first statement spoken by Jesus as he hung from the cross. **“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”**

We need to begin with the story of Simon of Cyrene. He was there that early Friday morning when Jesus was crucified. Simon of Cyrene was from the north coast of Africa. He was Jewish. He and his two small boys were traveling to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover.

Listen to Simon as he tells the story . . .

“My name is Simon. I'm from Cyrene. My two sons and I had been traveling for about two weeks. We were going to Jerusalem to attend the Passover. Finally,

Rufus, my son, shouted, '**Look, father! The temple!**' Sure enough, there it was off in the distance. The *Palace of God* we called the temple towering over Jerusalem.

"As we approached the city, we saw what appeared to be a parade coming toward us. But soon, we realized that it wasn't a parade. Roman soldiers were leading three men to a hill where criminals were often crucified. Crucifixion was a horrible death. The victims were nailed to a cross and left hanging from the cross until they died. It was a slow, painful death.

"Each of these criminals were carrying heavy wooden beams across their shoulders. I could tell one of the men had been beaten. His body was bloodied and bruised. He could barely walk. I took my two sons, Rufus and Alexander, and tried to shield them from this awful spectacle.

"Just then, one of the men, the one who had been badly beaten, stumbled and fell at my feet. I looked at him. I saw his face. I saw what looked like a crude crown of thorns wrapped around his head. And then, I remembered who he was. **'This was Jesus from Nazareth. He had gotten into trouble because he claimed he was the Messiah. The Jewish leaders hated him because they said he was a troublemaker. They said he should be killed'**.

"**'You there,'** I heard one of the Roman soldiers yell. He was pointing at me. **'You there. You carry his cross'**. There was nothing I could do. I told my boys, **'you stay close'**. I picked up the heavy cross and laid it on my shoulder and then I reached out my hand and helped Jesus to his feet. I started walking up the hill called *Calvary* or the *Place of the Skull* as the locals called the hill where the Romans crucified their victims.

"I dropped the cross at the top of the hill and quickly stepped back. I found my boys and stood with them. We watched as they stripped Jesus and laid him on top of the cross. They stretched out his arms and drove spikes into his wrists. Jesus shouted in pain. They took his ankles and nailed them to the side of the cross . . . one on the right and one on the left. Again, Jesus cried out in pain. Finally, they hoisted the cross up and set it in a hole . . . a hole deep enough to keep the cross from falling.

"My son Rufus began to cry and Alexander became sick at the sight. The Romans shouted to the crowd, **'Take a look at your king now! This is how Rome handles troublemakers'**. The soldiers laughed. There was a crowd of people surrounding the cross. Some, like the soldiers, laughed. Some shouted insults at Jesus. And some cried.

"And then Jesus took a deep breath. Someone in the crowd said, **'Shh! He**

wants to say something'. We all listened. You could tell that it was difficult for Jesus to talk, but this is what he said, **'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing'**.

"I'll never forget those words. Jesus was a dying man, a tortured and crucified man and yet, he was asking God to forgive his enemies. What kind of man would do such a thing? How could he pray for people who hated him? Ultimately, because of those words, I became one of his followers."

Jesus prayed from the cross. He said, **"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."**

The hundred-dollar question for us today is this: Who was the *'them'* Jesus was asking God to forgive? Who was the *'them'* he was praying for?

This is what I believe. I believe that Jesus was praying for the Roman soldiers that day. They were the ones who tortured and crucified him. **"Father, forgive them."**

I believe Jesus was praying for the two criminals hanging on either side of him. **"Father, forgive them."**

I believe he was praying for the crowd that surrounded the cross that early morning. They were the ones who were laughing and shouting insults at him. They were the ones who turned on Jesus from shouts of *'hallelujah'* on Palm Sunday to shouts of *'crucify him'* that early Friday morning. He prayed even for them. **"Father, forgive them."**

I believe he also prayed for the Jewish religious leaders. They were the ones who, because of their jealousy and hatred, conspired with the Romans to kill him. They were the ones who made up charges against Jesus to convict him. Even them. **"Father, forgive them."**

It's amazing, isn't it? Can you begin to imagine the length and depth and height and width of Jesus' mercy and forgiveness? He prayed for *them* as he hung on the cross. The Roman soldiers, the criminals, the crowd, and the religious leaders.

We're not quite done. There was someone else that Jesus was praying for as he hung on the cross that day. Do you know who?

It was us! We were included in Jesus' prayer. **"Father, forgive them,"** because we do not know what we're doing. We are just as guilty as the others. Our sins are just as great as their sins.

There's an old gospel hymn that asks the question, "**Were you there when they crucified my Lord?**" We'll be singing it at the end of today's service. "**Were you there?**" The answer is 'yes' we were there. Not in a real or physical sense, but in a spiritual sense we were all there that day. The very reason Jesus was hanging from that cross was because our sins also needed forgiveness. Your sins, and your sins, and your sins and mine. He forgave all of us that day. It's the very reason for the cross. The cross is our symbol and our reminder of Jesus' death and our forgiveness.

And so yes, we were there that day when they crucified our Lord. Yes, Jesus prayed for all of us. "**Father, forgive (say your name out loud). Forgive those in our churches and those on the street. Forgive those who live in this country and those who live on the other side of the world. Father, forgive them.**"

This is the power of the cross. This is the love of God in Jesus Christ. This is the reason he died. He died for all of us and for the forgiveness of our sins.

As you come forward for communion today, I invite you to say your own prayer. Thank Jesus for the gift of forgiveness. Thank Jesus for the cross. Thank Jesus for including even you. "**Father, forgive them, forgive them all.**"