

Immanuel Lutheran Church Augsburg  
Shobonier, Illinois  
Ash Wednesday  
February 17, 2021  
Luke 23:34

### The Pardoning Word

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

In the name of Jesus, the only Savior of the world,

As Jesus hangs dying on the cross, His first word is one of pardon, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” The world certainly does not know or speak such pardon. For the wonder is that Christ is asking for forgiveness for those who at that very moment are killing Him. Even as the hammer blows drive the nails through His flesh into the wood, Jesus is heaven-bent on forgiveness.

And He wants His people to be the same way. He wants His people to be as forgiving toward others as He is toward them. And to show how vital this is, He says, “If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:14–15). And when Peter sought to limit his forgiveness for a brother who sinned against him to a generous seven times, Jesus said, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:22). Then He told a parable of a servant who had been forgiven much but refused to forgive his fellow servant, only to have his own unforgiveness come back to him. “So also My heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (Matthew 18:35).

So, you see, forgiveness is to be a way of life for us, from God to us and from us to others. Yet our humanity, turned away from God and totally corrupted, wants nothing whatsoever to do with forgiveness. We are quick to condemn, slow to forgive, long on holding grudges. We seek our “pound of flesh,” wanting to get even and settle the score. We do not want to let it go, which is what “forgiveness” means at its core: Letting the thing go. Leaving it be. Pulling the plug on your anger or your desire to get even. Literally dropping dead to the thing as though it had never happened.

We do not naturally do this, not we who are natural-born bookkeepers of the wrongs committed against us. There is power to control there. We store our grievances up for another day when they might become useful, especially when energized by an accusing “always” and “never.” You always do this; you never do that. We nurse the wrongs committed against us like a pet, even long after we have forgotten the offense. “I am not speaking to him. I don’t remember why, but I am not speaking to him. I will never forgive him. I don’t remember what he did, but all I know is that I will never forgive him.”

And what makes this so dangerous is that unforgiveness hardens the heart. It is spiritually toxic and debilitating. The heart that was once softened and opened to God's forgiveness becomes calloused and calcified in unforgiveness. That's why Jesus makes forgiveness a key petition in the disciples' life of prayer, "Forgive us as we forgive." Keep the channels of forgiveness open, both vertically and horizontally. For the forgiveness you speak is the forgiveness you have heard spoken to you from God. It does not start with you, but with God. We are conduits, pipelines, directing that forgiveness to others where they have sinned against us. But the forgiveness comes from God, for only God can set a heart free to forgive.

Remarkably, Jesus said all sins will be forgiven, even every blasphemy uttered against Him. What sort of man is this who is so bent to forgive? He is the Son of Man, humanity restored to the image of God, reflecting God's perfect forgiving love to the world in human flesh. He is the perfect Forgiver, the Absolver par excellence, who came to forgive men their sins committed against Him and our fellow man.

As Jesus is nailed to the cross and it is stood upright in the ground, with a convicted criminal on either side, He speaks that first word of life, a pardoning word of forgiveness, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Even as they gamble for His garments, even as those passing by mock Him and offer Him sour wine to drink, He forgives them. Every sin, every blasphemy against Him, He forgives. Your sins against Him, in all the ways you drive those nails into His hands and feet, He forgives you.

His prayer to the Father is for you. Hear it as your own. Jesus pleads for you before the throne of grace, showing the wounds of His own crucifixion, bearing your sin. "Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing." And truthfully, we don't know what we are doing. We have no idea of the damage we do to others and to ourselves. We have only a small inkling of our own sinfulness, and even that we manage to rationalize away. Our deadness runs so deep, we even think we are doing God a favor when we pound away at our fellow man. And this word comes back to us against the background of cruel hammer blows, mockery, and scorn: "Father, forgive them."

Such a sweet, pardoning word sounds forth here as well. You hear it, in the Absolution at the start of the service or in the personal absolution with the pastor. Father, forgive him; forgive her. Jesus petitions the Father for it, and the Father always gives the Son what He asks for. The world is forgiven because Jesus prays for it to be forgiven, and He prays for it through the blood of His sacrifice.

His pardoning prayer reconciles; it makes whole again; it restores the enemy. What Adam did, this New Adam has undone. God and man are reconciled, at one, at peace in Jesus. In His body He carries the sin; from His mouth He speaks the pardoning word that delivers forgiveness. This is the pardoning word of the Church, His Body, the Word that alone enlivens the Church and her ministry. "The sins you forgive are forgiven; the sins you retain are retained" (cf. John 20:23).

You have been baptized into this pardoning Word that washes away your sin and cleanses you from all unrighteousness. Forgiveness freely given by God, freely received through faith, is also freely distributed in love. The same forgiveness that flows from the heart of Jesus flows through your forgiven heart set free to forgive those who sin against you with the same priestly intercession, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."

This first, pardoning Word sets the stage for all of Jesus' other words from the cross. It unbars the door, turns the key to the prison. You are free precisely because you are forgiven.

Let us pray: For Your pardoning Word, forgiving those who tortured You, forgiving us who have sinned against You, forgiving a world that knew You not but wished You dead, we give You thanks and praise, most holy Jesus. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Rev. Timothy J. Landskroener