

The First Word; “Father, forgive them...”

Luke 23:34

Lenten Vespers Service

February 17, 2021

Introduction of Seven Last Words

This evening Heather and I will begin a series of reflections on the seven last words of Christ from the cross. Just as we are offering a Sunday series on key encounters with Jesus in the Gospel of John... so we will offer this series as part of our Lenten Vespers services. You may know that there is a special worship service built around these seven last words – and that is traditionally held on Good Friday... and that it typically lasts three hours, which a little long for most Presbyterians. For many years seven Hickory churches have collaborated to offer this service. Last year we livestreamed it... this year we will do the same.

Since these seven words come from all four of the gospels, there is no way to actually know what order Jesus may have spoken them in. So, we will be using the order of the traditional Seven Last Words liturgy. And in that liturgy, the first word is found in Luke, chapter 23, verse 34: Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.

Sermon

Last summer, my wife, Kris, met a friend at an Air BnB outside of Knoxville. Only this wasn't your typical Airbnb. It was a little cottage... on a working farm... that had vegetables and flowers in the gardens and a variety of animals in the fields and barns... AND get this - each morning they had fresh eggs delivered to their door... each afternoon a just-picked watermelon.

Now, Kris is not really what you might call “a farm girl,” but she does enjoy following them on Instagram... and the latest big news from the farm is of the birth of 6 piglets. Tell me, are those little guys cute or what? Which means, of course, that everyone on the farm (especially the kids) is getting very attached to them! How could you not? Yet, we all know that eventually these cute little piglets will become full-grown adults... and that eventually someone will have to load them into a trailer and drive them to the slaughterhouse... no doubt with tears in their eyes.

Well, in Luke's story of Jesus' death, the Lord is not forsaken by God, he is forsaken by the people... and not just any old people, he is forsaken by THE most highly evolved people on the planet – the Romans. And he is forsaken by those whose intimacy with God was unparalleled – his own Jewish people. In Luke's story, these are the ones who load him up and drive him to the slaughterhouse... yet... he continues to love them all the way.¹

¹ The idea for this opening was inspired by the opening of Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon, “In the Name of Law and Order,” Home by Another Way (Cowley, 1999), p. 86.

Plenty of people think of Jesus as an innocent victim, I don't think that's true. The charges against him were blasphemy and treason – and he knew very well that being convicted of either one could get him killed. Blasphemy was the church's charge because he claimed to be the Son of God – the Messiah. Treason was the state's charge because he allowed his followers to call him "king." He was accused of subverting BOTH religion and the nation and that's what got him killed. So that the great scandal of his death was NOT that an innocent man died. The real travesty was that he was killed in the name of justice and faith... by people who were just doing their job... and who believed they were doing the right thing. They did away with him in the name of law and order... they killed him appealing to scripture and creed. Or as British author Dorothy Sayers put it, "They did away with God in the name of peace and quietness," But not before he forgave them all.

"Forgive them," he said to his Father. "Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Those who were standing around must have thought it peculiar that a man judged guilty of such serious offenses would be granting absolution to those who were just standing up for law and order and God. But this is what he did – while they pronounced him guilty, he maintained their innocence... while they executed him, he pardoned them... not wanting anyone punished for his death; especially people who didn't know what they were doing. The violence had to stop... he wanted it to stop with him... and he knew the only way that was going to happen was to drop the case... the only way that was going to happen was to forgive them. South African Archbishop, Desmond Tutu, said it best: "There is no future without forgiveness," Tutu said. In our marriages, in our families, in our friendships, in our nation and world, there is no future without forgiveness.

This day – Ash Wednesday – is about many things. Mortality, for one – we are all dust – dust which God makes into beautiful things – yet still dust. Ash Wednesday is also about humility – about being aware that Paul is completely justified in saying ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

And then, this day is about repentance - which involves actually confessing our sin... regretting our sin... hating our sin... and then, relying on the power of the Holy Spirit, trying to do something about it – changing direction, changing attitude, changing!

Well... as we do this work of Lent – as we do this work of being mortal and humble and penitent – we are assured by this first word that even before we lift one finger, we are forgiven. Before we give anything up or take anything on, we are forgiven. Because understanding that there is no future without forgiveness, our Lord has gone first... he has led the way by offering his life so that you and I might have a future.