

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, March 9, 2025

As we continue in worship and as we prepare to hear God's word read and proclaimed, I invite you to take a few deep breaths with me. So get comfortable in your pew, close your eyes if you would like, and let's take a deep breath [Music] in and breathe it out slowly. Take another deep breath in and breathe it out slowly. Let us pray.

Gracious God, you are as close to us as our next breath. May we sense your peace indwelling us and surrounding us this morning. May your peace quiet us to hear your word read and proclaimed. May it challenge us and call us forth in this season of Lent to be your people. For we ask it in the name of the crucified and risen one, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

So we begin a new Lenten sermon series, The Seven Last Words of Christ, this morning. I've been struggling a bit, because what I realized is the next several weeks are going to be pretty heavy. I mean these sayings, all seven of them, are spoken by Jesus from the cross, and that means that they are wrapped in all sorts of pain and difficulty. And so it's, to be honest with you, not something that I'm looking forward to necessarily—coming up here if it's so so heavy every single week, but the Lenten journey is one that is this invitation to us to a type of seriousness of purpose in this time as well, right? So I...I just wonder as we begin and we're about to hear this first last word of Jesus, I wonder if we might take a posture of hopefulness for what we know is to come, that we won't rush through the difficulty of the moment. But yet we will be informed throughout this season of the power of God working in and through Jesus Christ, even in this particular time of the crucifixion, okay, not to lighten the moment but to inform it fully, more fully.

We begin this morning in these seven seven last words with words from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus says “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” So our theme this day is forgiveness. We believe together that the season of Lent gives space for us to contemplate forgiveness, to reflect on the wrongs that we have perpetrated and those that have been perpetrated against us as well. The season also gives us space then to reflect on how we might be forgiven and how we might extend forgiveness. If we are indeed, as we hope to become, imitators of Christ, then we must be able to imitate even these words that we hear spoken from the cross this day. Before we read the text a bit of reflection. On Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, I spoke a bit about my mother and my sister and navigating early doctor visits and getting shots and how that was. It got me thinking this week a lot about my mom and my sister, and when I do that, I remember one particular part of our childhood. My sister and I, we loved each other, but maybe you with your siblings, if you had any, it was a kind of a love hate thing that went on, right, an ebb and flow So we would get on each other's nerves purposefully, and we would...we would do things to annoy each other and hurt each other, okay. My sister is, she had the strongest

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pinch of anyone I've ever known, okay, and we would run around, and we would do all these things when we were young. And inevitably when I wronged my sister or my sister wronged me, and we went through the whole debacle that was that disagreement, then my mother would come and find us, and she would put us in a very close proximity to each other in the same space. And let's say I was the one—this didn't happen often but let's say I was the one that perpetrated the ill. She would say “David, you need to say that you are sorry to your sister. Say you're sorry to Mindy.” And I would say begrudgingly and not believing a word of it, “I'm sorry, Mindy.” And then she would look to Mindy and she would say, “Mindy, you tell David that he is forgiven.” And she would look at me, and she would say begrudgingly and not believing a word of what she was saying, “David, you are forgiven.” Okay. We never meant fully, I don't think, any of those offers of confession or offers of forgiveness, right. I actually don't think that was the point though, and I think my mom knew that, right. What that was for us was practice. It was practice for us so that one day when we grew in maturity and years we might be able to stand before another that we had wronged, and we might be able to say with true integrity, “I'm sorry.” And then, maybe, if one said that they were sorry or not, we might be able to stand before them and say, “I forgive you.”

So there's something that is powerful about the practice of forgiveness that I don't want us to miss this morning. It's a radical thing this idea of forgiveness that is held up by the gospel. Fred Craddock is a renowned preacher, and he talks about forgiveness in this way. He said, “Forgiveness is in our vocabulary, the church's vocabulary. In the church we say it quite a bit. Our frequent use of the vocabulary of forgiveness should not dull our conscience to the fact of its importance, its absolute, irreplaceable importance to each of us as Christians. We cannot have friends without forgiveness. We cannot have family without forgiveness. We cannot have lasting relationships or marriages without forgiveness. But it is difficult, oh so difficult,” Craddock writes in *Why Is Forgiveness So Difficult*.

With those ideas held in our minds, let us read from the Gospel of Luke, the 23rd chapter beginning in the 33rd verse.

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by watching, but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

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The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

These last words of Jesus, the first in our series: “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” This plea of Jesus to the one that he calls Abba, Father—it calls us to something that we might not be ready for. We might not desire to do. I appreciate it, though, regardless. I appreciate particularly the context in which Jesus speaks these words. What I appreciate about this scripture is that the reality of hurt and pain cannot be denied when we are reading Luke 23. Jesus has carried the cross, been flogged on his way to the hill. The cross has been set in place, and he has been nailed upon it. The pain and the hurt of this...of this episode cannot be denied. They are ever present, and, yet, even through the blood and the nails and the anguish, Jesus pleads for forgiveness, which makes me think this is the sort of forgiveness I want to learn something about. Miroslav Volf is a professor of Theology and director of Yale's Center for Faith and Culture. He writes extensively about forgiveness, and he does, I think, a great job of defining a few important truths for us about forgiveness that are revealed for us particularly in this text from the Gospel of Luke. First he points out that forgiveness is costly...forgiveness is costly. The cost to Jesus is that he suffers the consequences of the sins of his executioners. It cost him everything—the sin of their violence, the sin of their ignorance, the sin of their taking part in the systemic systems of oppression and violence. Their violence, their ignorance are his to bear; and in response to this high cost, he prays for them, absorbing the cost of their sin. “At the heart of the Cross,” Volf says, “is Christ’s stance toward the enemy. Christ does not proclaim exclusion [for those who are opposed to him] but creates space [even] for the offender in the very act of suffering the consequences of their sin.” That's what he's accomplishing on the cross, not removing himself from it but staying in the midst of it. The very act of suffering the consequences of the sin, of their sin, is what he endures. It costs him absolutely everything. So don't believe for a second that forgiveness is not going to cost you something. It will. If you are to extend forgiveness and grace to another, it is going to cost you something. Jesus models this for us. Beyond forgiveness being costly, Jesus is...or this scene...this scene is very clear in how serious forgiveness also is. That's what I appreciate about this scripture, that the reality of the hurt can't be denied or hidden. It's right there, right there before us. For Jesus this business of forgiveness is serious. And that's important for us to know, because conventional wisdom is that forgiveness sometimes fails to take seriously the tragedy and pain and suffering caused by evil. That's not what's happening here. Forgiveness sometimes feels like betrayal of a victim or of a family or even of our very humanity. We are told, “Don't enable evil by overlooking it or minimizing it or trivializing it,” but the reality of this scripture is that, in fact, forgiveness means confronting evil and pain and suffering, naming it and dealing with it. Forgiveness is costly, but it's also serious business.

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Craddock tells the story of a six-year-old boy whose mother asked him to stop running through the house because he might stumble and fall and hurt himself or break something. So, of course, the six-year-old boy ran and stumbled and fell and broke a vase. His father saw what had happened, picked him up, dusted him off, and said, "Don't worry about it. It's just a vase." His mother, however, knelt down and gathered the shattered pieces and said softly, "It wasn't just a vase. It was my favorite vase. My mother gave it to me. Her mother gave it to her, and I looked forward to giving it to my children." And she wept on the floor, and the little boy sat down and wept with her, and the mother took him in her arms and hugged him, and he hugged her back. Who forgave here—the father or the mother?" The truth of forgiveness is that it confronts the reality of what has happened honestly; but even understanding how serious the offense is, it decides to return home by another way. And that's a critical point here for us—not to ignore that which has been perpetrated but to see it, to recognize it, to name it, and then to choose intentionally another way to return.

Finally, forgiveness renders evil powerless. Let me say that again. Forgiveness renders evil powerless. It doesn't feel that way in this moment, y'all, not when Jesus is hanging on the cross. And it won't feel that way when you try to extend forgiveness to one who has wronged you. It will not feel like evil is powerless. That's the longer arc of the story though. Jesus's prayer in this moment steals evil's power. He refuses to let evil have the final word. This is what I really appreciate from Volf in his work *The End of Memory*. "To triumph fully, evil needs two victories not one. The first victory happens when an evil deed is perpetrated. The second victory is when evil is returned." "The first victory happens when an evil deed is perpetrated. The second victory is when evil is returned." This idea is crucial in a world where retaliation is often seen as justified or even right. Jesus's prayer prevents evil from claiming its second victory. He does not return hatred but absorbs it. Jesus refuses to let evil have the final word.

Here's the thing. When we start talking about forgiveness, I wonder if there is someone that you are holding in your mind right now that has wronged you or that you have wronged, if there's a person or maybe even a group of people that you know have harmed you in a real way or that you have harmed in a real way. If you can imagine who those folks are, who that person is, I wonder if we might see Jesus's prayer as an invitation to us that doesn't deny the cost of forgiveness or its seriousness, but that invites us to take away the power of the evil that has been perpetrated by not giving it a second victory. When we do that we become imitators of Christ, and what we see here in Jesus on the cross is that as he prays for the forgiveness of those perpetrating, he is building...beginning...beginning to build a new sort of reality, a new type of kingdom in the world. We won't see it till much later, till he's already died, but something brand new will come forth from it. And it seems to me that when we forgive, we also...we become

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participants in the building up of that very same kingdom. Jesus is teaching us then here how we can act even as we endure the most difficult pain. It doesn't nullify the pain, but it does transform it.

Since I was thinking a lot about my mom and my sister this week and those early practices of forgiving and confessing, Wendell Berry's poem To My Mother came to mind. I want to read it to you. At the end he speaks about how this forgiveness creates a brand new reality, a new world, even Heaven. Hear his words:

*I was your rebellious son,
do you remember? Sometimes
I wonder if you do remember,
so complete has your forgiveness been.
So complete has your forgiveness been
I wonder sometimes if it did not
precede my wrong, and I erred,
safe found, within your love,
prepared ahead of me, the way home,
or my bed at night, so that almost
I should forgive you, who perhaps
foresaw the worst that I might do,
and forgave before I could act,
causing me to smile now, looking back,
to see how paltry was my worst,
compared to your forgiveness of it
already given. And this, then,
is the vision of that Heaven of which
we have heard, where those who love
each other have forgiven each other,
where, for that, the leaves are green,
the light a music in the air,
and all is unentangled, and all is undismayed.
[Poetry Magazine, October/November 1987, p. 14]*

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I wonder what forgiveness you have withheld, what pain inflicted upon you you have been unwilling or unable to move towards forgiveness for. I wonder what you have perpetrated or what we have. And I wonder how the one who is suffering on the cross might teach us even through blood and pain and anguish. I wonder if in this season of Lent on this first Sunday, you might reflect upon what it is that God is doing in this prayer, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing." I wonder if for us this day we might know that we are indeed forgiven, and we might extend that to another.

Let's pray together.

We wonder if your forgiveness precedes even our wrongs.

We wonder this morning if we have erred even within your love.

You know the ways in which we have perpetrated hurt.

You know the ways in which hurt has been perpetrated upon us.

We wonder this morning if we might be found in Jesus's prayer from the cross.

That being found there we might know that we are forgiven and not just forgiven but called to forgiveness.

Weighty are the pains, oh God.

May forgiveness bring healing to our souls.

May forgiveness bring release as we offer it to others.

May you be glorified in the ways that we practice this forgiveness in our lives.

May we become your faithful children once again as we ask for forgiveness and as we extend it to others.

For we ask it in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.