

The Cross of Mercy

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

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If we could even begin to imagine the horror of being crucified, we would find it hard to believe someone being able to speak while enduring such tortuous suffering. We could imagine hearing their groans of agony, their cries of pain, but speaking to any and all who would listen? That's hard to imagine. Hearing that Jesus had the strength to do so, we would have expected words like these: "God, help me"; "God, save me"; "God, please let this not be the way it has to be" — echoes of the same agonizing prayers Jesus offered to God in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Instead, what we hear from Jesus as he hung on the cross is that he died the same way he lived — in full knowledge of God's unfailing love for him and his own steadfast faithfulness to God. Jesus' final words on the cross bore witness to the mission for which he had been sent by God to reveal the way of salvation. That the kingdom of God will come not by might of the sword, but by the power of love. That this world and all that is in it will be redeemed, healed, transformed, only through the practice of forgiveness.

While dying on the cross, the first words Jesus loudly proclaimed were, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Who's the "them"? The soldiers standing guard at the foot of the cross? Did they truly not know what they were doing? Were they simply following orders, just as they had probably done many other times that week, not giving any thought to the guilt or innocence of the man they were crucifying? Maybe the first time these soldiers witnessed a crucifixion they were disturbed by the sheer brutality of it all, but becoming part of an execution detail made them calloused, unmoved hoisting up another criminal onto a cross and then standing around waiting for the person to die. Are they the "them" Jesus is asking God to forgive? Men who didn't realize the gravity of the injustice they were committing? Only after watching the way this particular criminal died and hearing his last words, did one of them realize they had crucified an innocent man. Indeed, that soldier had the last word, saying, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

Was Pilate among the "them" for whom Jesus asked for forgiveness? Certainly, he knew what he was doing when he sentenced Jesus to death. True, at first, he wanted no part of what the Jewish religious leaders were demanding him to do. Pilate tried his best to wash his hands of the whole ugly affair. Taking the politically expedient way out, he left it up to the mobs to decide who would live, Barabbas, the convicted murderer, or Jesus, afraid he'd have a riot on his hands if he let Jesus go free. As we know, the crowds' last word was Barabbas. Surely, Pilate knew what he was doing when he unjustly convicted Jesus of treason and condemned him to death. Was he among the "them" Jesus is asking God to forgive?

What about the chief priests and scribes who plotted Jesus' arrest and orchestrated his conviction by bearing false witness, breaking the ninth commandment? Certainly, they, who were charged with ensuring that people kept the law, knew the sins they were committing? Was Jesus praying for God to forgive them? Then there were the Pharisees and Sadducees. Blinded by their own religious ambition and threatened by the radical teachings

of this prophet whom God had sent to proclaim the good news of love and forgiveness, they made it their mission to discredit Jesus in the eyes of the very people he came to save. How could they, the religious elite, not have known what they were doing? Was Jesus asking God to forgive them?

If ignorance could ever be an excuse for such a heinous tragedy, then maybe Jesus sought mercy for those among the crowds who had followed him, who had shouted, "Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Who hailed Jesus as the one they had long-expected — their promised Messiah. Shouts that quickly turned to "crucify him" the moment they saw God's kingdom was not coming in the ways they wanted nor expected.

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Words of forgiveness from an innocent man to all those who had a hand in condemning him to death. Words that even now resonate down to us. We, too, are among the "them" for whom Jesus asks God to forgive and we, too, know not what we do. We don't always get the full magnitude of evil at work in our world despite the horrors we see on the nightly news. The power of evil at work in our world is much stronger than we think. We can't ever fully see the real width of the ripple effects of our inhumanity to others. On a more individual level, we aren't always aware of the true harm our sin causes us, nor the harm it causes others. We can't always see the deep and lasting damage our sinful attitudes, our racial prejudices, or our condemning speech can inflict upon someone's soul, even if we can see the physical harm we've caused.

When it comes to forgiveness, the weight of our sin is never ours to measure — it is for our victim to gauge. The same is true for God. The true measure of our sin, the true burden of our debt, is known only to God. Knowing we can't always know the full extent of our own sin or the sin of our world, Jesus continues to pray for us: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what we do." Words offered not to excuse, justify, condone, or minimize our sin, nor are they words offered to release us from our responsibility for the harm we have caused or for our understanding the true nature of that harm. They are the words of grace offered by the One sent to show us the way of forgiveness.

The first word from the cross is that our God is merciful, far more than any of us deserve. As we so often declare, the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. As God so lavishly forgives us, so we are to forgive others, not because they deserve our forgiveness nor because they have earned it by "making up the wrong they have done" or "until they come groveling back begging for our mercy." We forgive only as we love others the way Christ loves us, and with the love that is the fruit of the Spirit growing within us. As Paul reminds us in his famous love chapter, love keeps no record of wrongs. Easy to say, yet oh-so-hard to do at times. Then we ask for and receive again an infusion of Christ's love empowering us to forgive even those who truly know not what they have done to us.

Many of us own or wear many different styles of crosses. Each one a reminder of one of the many lessons the cross of Jesus teaches us about the character of our God. On the cover of the bulletin is the Mercy Cross. As the picture shows, the white cross representing the holiness of God overshadows the darkness of our sin. Thanks be to God that the Cross of Crucifixion has become, for us, the Cross of Mercy.