

Lenten Luncheon February 28, 2012
Glory of God in the Words of Jesus from the Cross:
“Father, forgive them”

Hymn “Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound” stanzas 1 and 2

Prayer:

Leader: Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.”

Unison: **As we hear these words of Jesus from the cross, help us, O God, to hear him praying these words for us.**

Leader: As we know that we too are forgiven through Jesus Christ,

Unison: **help us, O God, each and every day to live as forgiven people, reflecting your forgiving ways in our own words and actions, for we ask these things in his name. Amen.**

Scripture Reading

Mark 15:20-24

Leader: The soldiers led Jesus out to crucify him.

People: **They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross;**

Leader: it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.

People: **Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull).**

Leader: And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it.

People: **And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.**

Luke 23:34

Leader: Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

Lenten Meditation: Simon of Cyrene Reflects on the Words of Jesus

“Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing”

We had spent two weeks sailing from the north coast of Africa to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. My sons were small boys, yet old enough to feel the excitement as we approached the Holy City. As our small caravan came over the last hill, Rufus let out a shout, “Look, father, the Temple!” There she stood, the earthly palace of God, gleaming as she towered over the city. Though my family

had lived in Cyrene for generations, Jerusalem was for us, as for every Jew, our heart's home.

That night we joined our cousins in Bethany for the Passover Seder that marked the beginning of the Festival, sharing a meal and recalling God's salvation to our people. We ended that meal, as we did every year, praying for the coming of the Messiah. The next morning Rufus, Alexander, and I left early to spend the day in Jerusalem, visiting the Temple and then the Festival taking place near the markets.

As we approached the city we saw what appeared to be a parade coming our way. But soon we could see that this was no parade. There were Roman soldiers driving three criminals toward the rock quarry where criminals were crucified. Each of these criminals was carrying a heavy beam across his shoulders. One clearly had been badly beaten, for his body was bloodied and he looked as though he could barely walk. I took Rufus and Alexander by the hand and pulled them away from the road. I did not want them to see this horrible thing.

Just then the tragic figure, the sorely wounded man, stumbled and fell at my feet. I saw that his brow was wrapped in a crude crown of thorns, and suddenly I realized who this man was. This was Jesus of Nazareth, about whom I had heard, and whom some had claimed was the Messiah. I had heard that he had been critical of the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. But it was hard for me to believe that they would hate him and his comments so much that they would have him condemned to death in such a cruel way.

Everything was happening so quickly. I was lost in my thoughts, trying to see what was going on, when I heard one of the soldiers say, "You there! You carry his cross! And you, Jesus, get on your feet!" There was nothing I could do. There was no disobeying those Roman soldiers so I told my boys, "Stay close." I picked up the beam. It was far heavier than I thought. I pitched it over my shoulder and then I reached out my hand to Jesus to help him up. He was clearly

in pain. But there was still, in his face, a strength and determination. He looked me in the eyes, as if to thank me, and then he set his face toward Calvary.

It was only a five minute walk to the place called The Skull—Calvary—where the Romans crucified their victims. Dropping the beam before the executioners, I stepped back, searching for my boys. And then we stood and watched as they assembled the cross. Then they stripped Jesus naked and laid him atop the beams. They stretched his arms to the sides before they drove the spikes into his wrists as he shouted in pain. Then they nailed his ankles into the side of the cross, one on the right and one on the left. Finally, they hoisted his cross up and in position and, as they did, he let out another shout of pain.

I had never been so close to a crucifixion, so I had not realized what a horrible thing this was. Rufus began to cry. Alexander became nauseous. There were two thieves being crucified with Jesus, and the soldiers hoisted each one into the air.

The Romans shouted to the crowd, “Take a look at your king now! This is a lesson from Rome—don’t forget it!” The soldiers, laughing, began to throw dice for his clothing. Some in the crowd wept. Others hurled insults at him. The religious leaders stood with their arms crossed. There was a strange expression of satisfaction on their faces.

And then Jesus took a deep breath, and someone in the crowd said. “Shh! He’s about to say something.” This is what he said, “Father. forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

I will never forget these words. A dying man, tortured and crucified, praying that God would forgive his tormentors. What kind of man would do such a thing? His words will haunt me for the rest of my life.” (*Reflections based on those found in Final Words from the Cross by Adam Hamilton, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011*)

The Rev. Dr. Adam Hamilton who wrote many of the words on which those reflections of Simon of Cyrene were written concludes his reflections by having

Simon say, “His words would haunt me for the rest of my life. Ultimately, they would be the reason I became one of his followers.”

Now as a good Methodist, Dr. Hamilton may be aware of information that as a Presbyterian I do not have but I am not aware of any concrete evidence that because he carried his cross and heard Jesus pray, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,” that Simon of Cyrene ever became a follower of Jesus. There is a comment in Acts 11:20 that some men came from Cyprus and Cyrene to proclaim the gospel in Antioch. We have no evidence, though, that one of them was Simon or anyone who had been influenced by his testimony back here in Cyrene.

What we do have, though, is a very interesting addition that we have read this morning. The prayer of Jesus, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” is found only in Luke’s Gospel. This morning, though, I deliberately chose for us to read the opening words about Simon having to carry the cross for Jesus from Mark’s Gospel. The reason I chose Mark’s Gospel is that while Matthew and Luke also talk about Simon being forced to carry the cross for Jesus it is Mark alone who identifies Simon as he does by saying that he was the father of Alexander and Rufus. Why would Mark want to identify Simon in this way unless the people for whom he is writing his gospel would have known these men? What is also interesting is that in Romans 16:13 Paul says, “Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and greet his mother – a mother to me also.” Although the evidence may be slight it has been argued over the years that Rufus, the son of Simon of Cyrene, and the Rufus whom Paul mentions are one and the same person, and that Simon or maybe his widow had emigrated to Rome with her two sons, where they had become people of prominence in the church there and that Mark possibly writing his gospel in Rome knew them and that this is the reason he alone included their names with that of their father. Some scholars even go on to suggest that Paul’s phrase, “Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and greet his mother – a

mother to me also,” may mean that Paul himself may have been told much of the good news of Jesus Christ through this wife of Simon of Cyrene.

Much of this is speculation, and arguments from silence. We cannot be absolutely certain what impact carrying the cross for Jesus and hearing Jesus pray, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” may ultimately have had upon the life of Simon and his family.

But there is no need to argue from silence as far as our lives are concerned. What does it mean to you that Jesus beaten so badly that he was too weak to carry his cross so Simon had to carry it for him and then experiencing all of the pain and torture of crucifixion would pray from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” Still today is this the prayer that we would expect to hear from his lips? Even after so many centuries are the suggested comments of Simon of Cyrene so strange when he said, “I will never forget these words. A dying man, tortured and crucified, praying that God would forgive his tormentors. What kind of man would do such a thing? His words will haunt me for the rest of my life.”

As we hear Jesus pray, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” we are reminded of the way in which even on the cross Jesus revealed that amazing grace through which God has reached out to this world to offer to us the gift of God’s salvation. As we hear his prayer and celebrate the great things that God has done for us in Jesus Christ we are prompted, of course, to look at our lives and to ask how are we being his followers today, and how are we living as the children of such a gracious God? Do our lives reflect the forgiving grace of God that enabled Jesus to pray, “Father, forgive them?”

Simon and probably most who heard his prayer never expected to hear Jesus praying in this way. But as those who claim to be followers of the One who prayed in this way who may expect that we too would want to pray for God’s forgiveness for those who have hurt us? Yet would they hear such a prayer on our lips? Would they see us seeking to live out such a prayer by our actions and by the

way in which we treat those who have hurt us, disappointed us, let us down, and have failed to be all that we had hoped they would be?

As we hear Jesus pray, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” I would invite us all to pause and to think of one person whose life would be changed as many suggest Simon’s life was changed if only they heard us pray such words. (Time of Silence)

As you think of that person I would invite you to continue each day this week to pray for God’s forgiveness for that person and also to pray that God will guide you to see how by your words and your deeds you can show your forgiveness towards that person. (Time of Silence)

Prayer:

Leader:

Jesus, those you healed and fed shouted, “Hosanna to the son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” Just a few days later, they shouted, “Crucify him!” Your twelve best friends betrayed you, denied you, or abandoned you, leaving you to hang alone on the cross. As waves of pain racked your body, you appealed to the love and compassion of your Father and cried out to him to heal and forgive. “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

Unison:

Jesus strengthen me to forgive those who have hurt me. Help me to imagine myself at the foot of the cross, uttering those same words as sincerely and honestly as he did: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” Jesus, allow me to give to others the forgiveness you have given me. By my attitude and actions, allow them to experience your healing love and compassion until they know that both you and I have forgiven them. Help me to live as you died, freely forgiving others, for I ask these things in your name.

Amen. *(based on the prayer by Rich Cleveland in “The Seven Last Words of Christ” 2002 The Word Among Us Press)*

Hymn

“To God be the Glory”

stanzas 1 and 2