

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Marianna, Florida**  
**Sunday, February 26, 2012**  
**Sermon by Huw Christopher, Pastor**

Scripture Readings: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32  
Luke 23:26; 32-37

Sermon Title: “The Glory of God in the Words of Jesus from the Cross: ‘Father, forgive’”

Sermon Text: Luke 23:34: Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

“What is the most important thing I need to know about God?” This morning if as you were leaving this church someone met you on Jefferson Street or Clinton Street or in our parking lot at the back and asked you this question how would you answer? Even more so if they put you on the spot and said, “I see you have been at church, please tell what is the most important thing that you learned there this morning about God,” what would you want to tell that person?”

Last Thursday morning I was trying to decide how to introduce this sermon. As I was taking my shower I thought about this question, “What is the most important thing I need to know about God?” An hour or so later as I was reading one of my online devotionals for the day I read these words from Shannon Kelly in which she said, “I was walking through the campus of a large university to get lunch with some students. On the sidewalk in the commons, I walked past a street

preacher who was shouting about how we were all damned to go to hell.”

*(www.d365.org/journeytothecross. Thursday, February 23, 2012)*

Is this the response you would want to give to anyone who asked you this morning, “What is the most important thing I need to know about God?” Would you tell that person that the most important thing you had learned about God here this morning has been that God is in the business of wanting to damn everyone and to condemn them hell?

As you think about what your response might be, let me add what Shannon Kelly wrote when she said, “My first reaction was to laugh. Then I became sad for this individual who was so clearly angry, and was letting that energy drive him and his view of God.”

“What is the most important thing I need to know about God?” Like that street preacher our own views of God will very naturally influence how we will respond to that question. As you think about your own view of God I would invite you again to think about the words of Jesus that we have heard again this morning.

Last Wednesday evening at our covered dish supper we began our reflections for Lent this year using the last words of Jesus from the cross. As we did so we came to see that what traditionally have been called the “Seven Last Words of Jesus,” or “Seven Last Sayings of Jesus” are not found in all four of the Gospel accounts of the death of Jesus. Indeed that we have seven sayings only as we combine the one saying that is found the same in Matthew and Mark with the three different sayings that we find in Luke with the three other different sayings that we find in John. During Lent this year we will be looking at each of these seven sayings. We will be looking at these sayings not just as a way of hearing and remembering what Jesus said. We will be using them as a way of helping us to think about this final view of God that Jesus was seeking to impart to those who first heard his words and with the whole world in these last few hours of his life as

he hung on the cross. We will look at these sayings to help us to reflect on the glory of God that as the Son of God, Jesus was seeking to share with us.

The fact that these seven sayings come from all four Gospels means that there is no way in which we can determine the order in which Jesus spoke these words from the cross. This Lent we will be using the sayings in the traditional order that they have been used over many centuries. As we do so it is interesting to see what people have chosen to be the first saying of Jesus from the cross. We have heard it again this morning, “Then Jesus said, ‘Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’” As we hear this words we are invited to think what view of God do they present, and what is the glory of God that they reflect?

“Father, forgive them.” The fact that Jesus has the confidence to pray in this way highlights for us his view of God. Here in this prayer we see the heart of God. If Jesus did not know that the heart of the eternal is most wonderfully kind, and that God’s ways are ones of mercy and of grace then he would never have been able to utter this prayer from the cross. Seeking God’s forgiveness for those who are treating him so cruelly as they have made him suffer as they have hung him on a cross to die speaks not only of his own desire, but even more of how he saw God desires to treat people even those who reject his ways, and who turn from his love. As Jesus prays, “Father, forgive them,” he was in so many ways simply making a final attempt to tell people what he had been trying to tell them through his words and his actions throughout his ministry.

Early in his ministry people had heard him tell the paralytic, who had been carried to him by four friends, before he healed him, “Your sins are forgiven.” They had heard Jesus remind them of God’s ways as he had invited those who were without sin to cast the first stone at the woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. He had gathered with those whom the Pharisees and the scribes, the religious authorities of his day, considered tax collectors and sinners, and even had

the audacity to share such intimate fellowship with them as to eat meals with them. As they grumbled and complained about his actions, Jesus had told them the story of the way in which the father had treated the younger son. Clearly the father did not treat the son as he deserved to be treated. In fact he treats him far better than the son ever hoped he would be treated. Certainly he did not treat him as most people would expect him to treat him. His forgiving love for him was lavish, excessive and exceedingly extravagant. By implication Jesus is saying this is the way in which God wants to treat all human beings who will turn to him. As he prays from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know that they are doing,” he is making clear to all who will hear him that God has not changed his mind. Despite how people may have treated him as the Son of God and as the one whom God had sent into this world to most clearly reveal the glory of God, God still wants to reach out to people with forgiveness, accepting them still as God’s children with amazing grace, with boundless mercy and with love divine, all loves excelling.

Whenever we hear people proclaim that God is in the business of condemning people to hell we have to listen again to this prayer of Jesus from the cross. If ever there was a time and a place when it would seem to be right and proper for God to refuse to forgive and to be ready to condemn people to hell it surely was as the Son of God suffered such rejection and the cruel death of the cross. Yet even on that cross Jesus, the Son of God, prays, “Father, forgive them,” in the assurance and with the confidence that God’s ways of wanting to relate to human beings have not changed. Despite how they may have treated him, God still wants to reach to all people with amazing grace, with boundless mercy and with a love divine, all loves excelling.

“What is the most important thing I need to know about God?” As he prays from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are

doing,” Jesus is highlighting one of the main things he wants the world to know about God, that God wants to relate to all people with forgiving love and gracious acceptance. This is the amazing good news that Jesus has given us the privilege of claiming for our own lives and of sharing with other people. If you take nothing else away from this service to share with someone who may ask you what you have learned here this morning I hope that all of us as we hear the prayer of Jesus from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” will have grown in our appreciation of the good news of God’s amazing grace, God’s boundless mercy, and God’s love divine, all loves excelling that God wants all people to know and claim in their lives.

The reaction of the elder brother in the story that Jesus told reminds us, of course, that for many people, this good news is just too good to be true. Like the Pharisees and scribes of Jesus day this elder brother was not ready to speak and act like his father in extending amazing grace, boundless mercy and love all loves excelling even to his brother whom he did not deem worthy to be treated in that way. His anger at his brother and also at what he regarded as the stupid and wasteful way his father had treated his younger brother reminds us of the comments of Shannon Kelly about the way in which she had felt the anger of the street preacher in his words in which he was assuring people that God was condemning them to hell.

As we hear Jesus pray, “Father, forgive them,” we are challenged to look at our own views of God and what we feel is the most important thing that Jesus would want us to know about God. His prayer reminds us of how earlier he had encouraged people to pray in a similar way themselves as in his model prayer he had said that people should pray, “Forgive us our debts, or our trespasses, or our sin, as we forgive our debtors, or those who trespass or sin against us.” His words remind us that the view of God that he reflects in his prayer, “Father, forgive

them,” is not just something to believe it is also something to live as those who claim to be the children of God. Rosamond Herklots in her hymn has reminded us of how hard it is to live as the children of a God whose glory Jesus proclaimed as he prayed, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” She recognizes that we can live these words only as we ourselves have been overwhelmed by the amazing grace, the boundless mercy and the love divine, all loves excelling of which Jesus sought to remind us and to remind the whole world as he prayed from the cross, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing.” Let us pray for that amazing grace to more fully fill our lives and to be seen in our ways that people may come to appreciate not just by our words but also by our actions what we see to be the most important thing to know about God. We will pray as we sing together the hymn of Rosamond Herklots. As a way of reminding us of that amazing grace that God has shown for us in Jesus Christ we will sing this hymn today not to the tune Detroit to which it is set in the Presbyterian Hymnal but to the more familiar tune, “Amazing Grace” The words of the hymn are to be found at hymn No. 347.

#### **HYMN AFFIRMING OUR FAITH AND RESPONSE No. 347**

*(sung to the tune Amazing Grace found at No. 280)*

- 1. "Forgive our sins as we forgive," You taught us, Lord, to pray  
But You alone can grant us grace to live the words we say.**
- 2. How can Your pardon reach and bless the unforgiving heart  
That broods on wrongs and will not let old bitterness depart?**
- 3. In blazing light Your cross reveals the truth we dimly knew:  
What trivial debts are owed to us, how great our debt to You!**
- 4. Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls and bid resentment cease.  
Then, bound to all in bonds of love, Our lives will spread Your peace.**