

Covenant Word

When Forgiveness Transcends Tragedy

Jere 23:1-6; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
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Pastor
Sunday
November 25, 2007*

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting
to read and study these
thoughts more
carefully. Please know
that I do not take full
credit for anything that
may be contained
within, because I may
have read or heard
something at some point
during my pilgrimage
and do not remember
its source and thus,
cannot give the rightful
author his/her credit. I
pray that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.
Sarah Shelton**

Next week, we begin Advent. Advent is the beginning of the Christian calendar as we anticipate and then celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas. If next week is the beginning of the Christian year, that rightly marks today as the end. Liturgically, today is known as Christ the King Sunday. It has been a long time since Lent and Easter wherein we remembered the events of the crucifixion and resurrection. We have journeyed through Pentecost, the longest season of the church

year, during which we have followed the events of Jesus' ministry and as we all know. These events lead us back to

Jerusalem and the cross. Thus we end with the truth that in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him all things are reconciled because of His blood spilt on the cross. (Colossians 1)

Luke's gospel clearly wants us to remember that Jesus is a king. So this writer hangs over His head a sign that states here is "The King of the Jews." (23:38) It is one of the few details that Luke gives us as readers. He tells us that the crucifixion took place on The Skull, but there are not details of the execution itself. In fact, for this one event that has stirred the imaginations of artists, musicians, poets and preachers for centuries, Luke's account is shockingly brief, simple, straightforward.

Luke tells us who attended the execution. (Exegesis from Fred Craddock, Interpretation: Luke) The soldiers assigned to crucifixion detail are there, of course. They make sport of Jesus, mocking Him with the title, "King of the Jews." They say that surely this king can save himself! They offer Him vinegar to drink, and we assume that it is these soldiers who gamble for Jesus' clothing.

The rulers of the Jews are also present. They mock Jesus by using the titles "Messiah and "Chosen One"

when they refer to Jesus. They are quick to point out that since Jesus saved others, then surely, He can save Himself. Together with the soldiers, these rulers remind us of the Tempter's voice that Jesus heard in the wilderness at the beginning of His ministry who also said, "Command this stone to become bread; give yourself full authority and glory over all the kingdoms of the world; throw yourself down from the pinnacle and let the angels come to guard you...if...if...if...you are the Son of God." (4:1-13)

The crowd is also at the scene. These same folk who hung on Jesus' every word at the Temple; who witnessed His miraculous works; who followed Him through the streets of Jerusalem while waving palm branches in the air, they are all present. Yet, they are strangely silent. They stand powerless before Jesus. They are caught between the forces of religion and government who manipulated the truth in order to bring about Jesus' execution. (Craddock)

Two times, the writer of Luke turns our attention to the individuals on the crosses. Interestingly, both times, we hear words of forgiveness come from the mouth of Jesus. The first time, Jesus asks for

blanket forgiveness: "Forgive them; for they know not what they do." The use of "they" and "them" appears to be purposefully vague and

indefinite. It leaves the interpretation wide open to include anyone who feels implicated to also be beneficiaries of His prayer for forgiveness. (Craddock) It is just vague enough to give us permission to ask ourselves, "How have I rejected Him? How do my actions ridicule Him? In what ways do I refuse to make Him Lord and King?" Perhaps the words of Jesus are best understood as an opportunity to pray for ourselves with words like: "Father, forgive me; for I do not know what I am doing." (Michael A. King, "Holy Hate," Christian Century, Nov. 13, 2007)

The second time Luke turns our attention to the cross; it is to take in the tormented exchange between the three persons being crucified. All of the gospels agree that Jesus did not die alone. Luke, however, is the only one who reports the words that they fling at one another.

According to Matthew and Mark, the others being crucified are robbers. Luke calls them "criminals." Whatever they did, one of them did not think it was as bad as what Jesus had done. So this thief joined in with the others and jeered at Him. "Aren't you the Messiah? I thought you were the Messiah! Everyone says you are the Messiah. So why don't you get us out of here?" (Barbara Brown Taylor,



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“The Man in the Middle,” Home By Another Way)

Now these were not statements he said under his breath. The criminal way over on the other side of Jesus heard him and snapped back, “Do you not fear God? We are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” (Taylor)

As if the criticism that surrounded His ministry had not been enough...as if the jeers of those already expressed at the foot of the cross had not been enough...Jesus now finds Himself inescapably stuck in the middle of controversy even while hanging on the cross. With one side attacking Jesus and one side defending Jesus, we watch the essence of the gospel unfold. “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom,” the one criminal asks. Hanging there as bloody, exhausted and guilty as he was, this criminal had hope that he might survive even if only in the memory of this One who was the King of the Jews. All he asks is to be remembered, but what he receives is so much more, for Jesus said, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”

In the course of our text, three times, Jesus is mocked with the words, “Save yourself.” The last time is by the jeering criminal who is bold enough to add “save yourself and us.” So in His last act, Jesus does save someone. It is not Himself. Instead, it is the dying criminal who fits right in with all the other “sinners” that Jesus touched throughout His ministry. In His dying hour, Jesus is still fulfilling His own statement that “the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.” (19:10) (Craddock)

The three men had hours to go before Jesus could keep His promise. They were long hours during which Luke does not record any more talk between the prisoners. And yet, wherever the symbol of the three crosses survives, their conversation continues...a conversation that begs forgiveness to transcend tragedy.

Just a little over a year ago, we listened in amazement to a conversation of forgiveness that transcended tragedy in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. (All information taken from Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy by Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nutt, and David L. Weaver-Zercher) Twenty-six children, ranging in age from 6 to 13, assembled in a one-room Amish school house with their twenty-two year old teacher. After reading scripture in German, reciting the Lord’s Prayer, and singing three hymns, the children began their day of study. It was soon interrupted by thirty-two year old Charles Carl Roberts who, at gun point, dismissed the teacher, her adult guests, and all the boys. Before police could get into the building, Roberts shot ten of the girls and then, turned the gun on himself. In addition to Roberts, three of the girls died before authorities could get them to a hospital. Two additional girls were sisters. Eight year old Mary Liz, was taken to Christiana Hospital, and died in her mother’s arms shortly after midnight. Her parents were then, driven seventy miles to the Hershey Medical Center. There, at 4:30 a.m., Lena, Mary Liz’s seven year old sister, also died in her mother’s arms. Within sixteen hours of the shooting, five of the girls were, as the Amish

parents repeated many times, “safe in the arms of Jesus.” Five other girls remained in the hospitals critically injured and struggling for their lives.

During the same week, two other school shootings took place in other parts of the United States. Why does the story of the Amish Schoolhouse continue to be the story that we remember? Perhaps it was the media coverage; perhaps it was the horrific events’ perhaps it was because the tragedy struck a people and a place that many of us imagined was immune from such terror; or perhaps it was because of the swiftness with which the Amish forgave the killer and offered grace that transcended the tragedy itself.

For you see, the Amish quickly realized that Roberts’ widow and children were also victims of the shooting...victims who had lost not only a husband and a father, but also their personal privacy. Unlike the Amish victims, the Roberts family had to bear the shame of having a loved one inflict pain on innocent children, their families and the community in which they lived. So within a few hours of the shooting, the Amish reached out to the killer’s family. One Amish neighbor went to Roberts’ father’s home. He held the senior Mr. Roberts in his arms and said, “We forgive you.” Others went to Roberts’ wife and took food and gifts as visible, tangible expressions of their forgiveness.

Amish grace soon moved beyond spontaneous words and personal gestures to more formal invitations. The Roberts family was invited to several of the slain children’s funerals. More surprisingly, when the Roberts family gathered to bury the gunman at the Georgetown United Methodist church, more than half of the seventy-five mourners were Amish.

The presence of Amish mourners at Roberts’ burial may have been the most dramatic expression of their grace, but it was not the final one. Several weeks after the shooting, a meeting took place at the firehouse between then members of the Roberts family and the Amish families who lost their children. An Amish leader said, “We went around the circle and introduced ourselves. The wife cried and cried. We all talked and cried. Because the wife was near me, I put my hand on her shoulder. It was all moving and intense. There was a higher power in the room.”

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It is not surprising that the most consistent and wide-reaching discussion after this tragedy was about the nature of the Christian life. To be sure, many political issues like gun control, school violence, the war on terror, capital punishment, penal reform, violence against women, and many others were all debated.

However, the most prominent questions were: What does it mean to live a true Christian life? And, Have the Amish set a standard to which other Christians must aspire?

As believers in the One who offered forgiveness during His own personal tragedy, we know the answer to be “yes, it is a standard to which we, as Christians, all aspire.” Sister Joan Chittister in The National Catholic Reporter agreed that what we witnessed was the Christianity we profess. “What leaves us stunned,” she says, “is that the Amish actually practiced it!”

The examples of forgiveness from the cross and from the Amish teach us that forgiveness does not undo a tragedy; it does not deny that a wrong has taken place, nor does it pardon the wrong. What forgiveness does is to give up the right to hurt the wrongdoer in return. What forgiveness does is to name the unspeakable hurt that has occurred. It is saying, “I may never be able to forget what has happened, but I refuse to allow it to have power over me all the days of my life.” What forgiveness does is to constitute a first step toward a future that is more hopeful and potentially less violent.

We often say that in order to forgive, we must forget. The words from the cross and the actions from the Amish, teach us that forgiveness is less a matter of forgetting and more a matter of re-membering. The thief asks Jesus to re-member him...to take the ways that tragedy and injustice had dis-membered him and through grace and forgiveness bring him into Paradise as a whole person.

Forgiving an atrocious offense:

- People whose children have been abducted and harmed
- People whose marriages have been shattered by unfaithfulness
- People whose reputations have been destroyed by so-called friends
- People who have been physically and emotionally abused
- You name your offense...

Forgetting this may not ever be possible, but what is do-able is our response...our decision about how we will use God’s love, God’s grace and God’s forgiveness to re-member...to re-construct...to re-structure our lives so that by our living and through our relationships, we will inspire goodness, forgiveness and grace.

The message from Luke’s gospel is clear: forgiveness transcends tragedy. When I moved into the pastor’s office here at Baptist Church of the Covenant, I hung a single cross on the wall and said a prayer of blessing on the work that would transpire within that space. Little by little, over time and through life events, you have gifted me with crosses that represent not just the uniqueness of who we are as persons but that speak to the variety of burdens, hurts and joys that we each carry. When I look at those crosses, I remember the grace that sustains us in tragedy; the courage that lends us strength to put one foot in front of the other; the forgiveness that makes it possible for us to re-member ourselves, with God’s help, into wholeness. I began with a crucifix. I have,

however, ended up with a picture of the church whose conversation is the same as that which Luke records: “Father forgive us, for we know not what we do.”

O Lord, Our God: As the church and as individuals, may we continue the conversation that began on the cross, oh, those many years ago, so that we too are known as those who practice forgiveness that transcends tragedy. Amen.”

We normally think of goals and resolutions to be the subject for consideration on the first day of a New Year.

But just as Jesus saved another in the last hours of His life...just as the Amish practiced forgiveness at the end of their children’s lives...so we have opportunity on this last day of the Christian

calendar to resolve to put some things to rest by practicing what we profess by saying, “I forgive you. I forgive you. I forgive you.” Perhaps this is your decision of faith today. Or perhaps you desire to receive Christ’s forgiveness through a personal profession of faith. Perhaps you want to be received into a community of faith who practices forgiveness by becoming a church member or perhaps you desire to be an agent of forgiveness through dedicating yourself to a Christian vocation. Whatever your decision, we invite you to make it privately in the pew or publicly with me here at the front as we stand and sing, “The Church’s One Foundation,” # 350.