

“Father, Forgive Them”  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
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I've been thinking lately about the gangster, Arnold Rothstein, the guy who's often credited with fixing the 1919 World Series. I've been thinking about what he said after he was shot during a poker game in 1928. Someone asked who shot him. "Me mother did it," he said. His mother. Even in death he was not going to rat. You know, at that point, what is the killer going to do to him? Naming his mother was in fact nothing more than reasserting one last time, in the face of death, who he was, which was a guy who would not rat. And this is what we want from last words, this kind of summing up of who a person is. Consider the last words of Oscar Wilde, "Either that wallpaper goes, or I do." Or of Bing Crosby, "That was a great game of golf, fellers." Or of Steve Jobs, who according to his sister, uttered, "Oh wow, oh wow, oh wow," as he drew his last breath. One of my favorites, though, comes from the French atheist Voltaire, who on his deathbed was asked to renounce Satan, to which he replied, "Now, now, my good man, this is no time for making enemies." In each of these examples, last words represent one final shot at figuring it all out, summing it all up, if not the whole of one's life than at least one's perspective on it. They seek to give meaning and significance to life at the exact moment of our death.

This is perhaps no more true than the first of Jesus' last words: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." For in that word, that request, not for himself but for others, we see a summing up of Jesus' understanding of his place in the world, his purpose for living. Jesus came to forgive sin.

Yet, we may well ask, for whom is Jesus asking forgiveness on the cross? Most obviously, his prayer was for the soldiers that did the deed, them that wielded the whip, that drove the nails, that thrust the spear—all in a day's work on foreign assignment, far from home. And certainly, also, for the leaders of his own people, the fragile, frightened establishment that could not suffer being in the presence of God's Son and so conspired to have him put to death. What about pitiable Pilate, forever wringing his hands that will be forever soiled? Yeah, Jesus probably prays for him too. And yet it is also equally true that he is asking forgiveness for us—you and I—for we were there too at the crucifixion.

You may recall how last Sunday, we began Holy Week by reading the passion story and when we came to the part where the crowd shouts, "Crucify him! Crucify him!," that part is read by the entire congregation, for we were there. The old spiritual song asks, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" Yes, we answer. Yes, we were there when we crucified our Lord. It is for us, as well as the Jewish leaders, Pilate, and the Roman soldiers that Jesus prayed. To paraphrase the poet John Donne: "Send not to know by whom the nails were driven; they were driven by you, by me." Our sin put him there on that cross, not just the sin of the soldiers, priests and Roman authorities. But our sin too.

Indeed, while Jesus' death is not all our fault, it is our fault too. Or as the venerable rabbi Abraham Heschel was fond of saying, "Some are guilty, all are responsible." We would like to draw a line between ourselves and the really big-time sinners, the great moral monsters of history—the Hitlers and Stalins and Maos and Amins and lesser mass murderers. We haven't committed any big-time sins like they have. Yet complicity and complexity alert us to the ways in which their crimes find corresponding corruption in our own hearts. "Whoever looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment." Such words from Jesus shake us from our complacent sinfulness. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn said, reflecting on the crimes of Stalin's gulags, "The line between good and evil runs not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but through every human heart." Recognizing the line that runs through our hearts too, we can no longer draw a line between "us" and "them."

We cannot blame our parents and how we were raised, just as we cannot blame our primordial parents for that fateful morning in the garden, for we were there too. Eve was the first but she wasn't the last. If we were honest with ourselves, had we been standing at that tree, our mouths and our hands would be covered with fruit. Things we shouldn't know and things we shouldn't see. But who can look long and honestly at the victims and perpetrators of history's horrors—Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, and the American slave plantations, but also the Ukraines and Shanghais and Yemens of today—who can look at these and say that this has nothing to do with us? For, in truth, where would we have taken our stand that Friday afternoon? Next to Jesus or with the mocking crowds, cringing with disciples or with the jealous priests? Knowing myself and the thousand big and little things that I have done or failed to do, I cannot deny that I was there. In ways I do not fully understand, that I don't even know, I know that I too did the deed, wielded the whip, drove the nails, thrust the spear. I too was included when Jesus said, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do."

Yet just as I—as we—are implicated in Jesus' death, we are just as surely implicated in the forgiveness for which he prays. We too were lifted up in prayer from the barbaric, earthly existence of the world "red in tooth and nail," our names borne on the holy, innocent breath of the Son of God, carried to the ear of the Father. The Father heard the Son's plea for the forgiveness of those who hurt him, who hated him, who conspired to put him to death, who should have known better but didn't. Jesus prayed "Father, forgive them." The Father consented and gave him the cross. Jesus was the cost of our forgiveness, a cost that God agreed to pay. Thanks be to God.