

WHO EATS THE LOSS?

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The Seven Last Words of Christ: The First Word

And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34)

If you go up to Union Square you will see, of course, the great statue of George Washington. But if you look around for a bit you will also find a statue of Abraham Lincoln, one of Lafayette, and since 1986, a statue of Mohandas Gandhi. Whenever I see the statue of Gandhi, I recall a scene from his life that is purportedly true, and portrayed in the 1982 biographical movie. Gandhi, as you know, was the Hindu leader of India's struggle to throw off British colonial rule. After World War Two an exhausted British Empire finally granted the Indian people their independence, but the country soon fell into horrific strife along religious lines. Hindus and Muslims were killing each other on the streets, and Gandhi responded with a hunger strike that he would continue until the violence stopped.

At one point in his hunger strike, a distressed Hindu man came to Gandhi, confessing that he and his family had been caught up in the violence. The Muslims had killed his young son, and in retaliation, the man had killed a Muslim child. "I smashed his head against the wall, and since then I have been living in hell," said the man, overwhelmed by the burden of his own guilt. Gandhi told the man that he knew a way out of hell. The Hindu man should go out into the street, find an orphaned Muslim boy whom no one wanted, take the child into his home, raise him as his own son until he is fully grown, but raise him as a Muslim. The man was stunned, and went away sobbing, unsure which was the heavier burden to bear: his own guilt, or the price he would have to pay to atone for his guilt.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell us that on the first Good Friday, Jesus uttered seven phrases from the cross. We take the first word from the Gospel of Luke: "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" According to Luke's chronology, Jesus spoke these words soon after the soldiers had driven the nails through his wrists and ankles and dropped the cross into its socket. In what must have been unimaginable pain, Jesus looked down and saw those same soldiers now casting lots for his garments. He looked at the two criminals on either side of him, also being crucified. He looked out on all those in Jerusalem who had condemned him, deserted him, betrayed him, mocked him, and scourged him, and said, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*"

Everyone involved in the death of Jesus was caught up in the overwhelming, destructive reality of sin. Then as now, the terrible wounds that people inflict on one another diminish if not destroy the abused and the abusers alike. Sometimes the abusers know not what they do, sometimes they know all too well what they do. Often the victims suffer irretrievable loss, and the victimizers – if they have any soul – sooner or later realize that they have saddled themselves with a debt they cannot ever repay. They live in hell. The scales of justice are out of balance and no earthly compensation can restore them. No monetary reward, no lifelong prison sentence, no apology or expression of remorse, no retaliation or act of vengeance can set them right. If we try to view the reality of sin through God's eyes, then we see how we have completely dashed God's hopes and expectations for humankind. God has made his goodness and love known to us in the creation, in the calling of Israel to be his people, in his Word spoken through the prophets, and above all in the Word made flesh, Jesus. How do we respond? We respond by crucifying

Jesus. We respond with wars, genocides, crime, callousness, abuse, ignorance, and waste. We have grieved God's heart of love, and we are unworthy to stand in God's presence.

Nevertheless, Christians have always claimed that because of what happened on this day – because of the death of Jesus, because Jesus offered himself as a full and perfect sacrifice, and prayed from the cross words of forgiveness – God takes away the sins of the whole world. Jesus' death atones for our sins, and God is satisfied. The scales of justice are back in balance. We struggle to understand how and why, and it's important to note that the church has never embraced any one theory of the atonement over another, saying this one is right and that one is wrong. We know not how, but still we claim that the death of Jesus sets us right with God. Some go so far as to say that the death of Jesus is what God required. God planned it. God demanded it.

Throughout the ages many have objected to the central Christian truth that draws a bright, unbroken line between the death of Jesus and God's forgiveness of our sins. It is crude, they say. It is unsophisticated, and unworthy of the highest ideals for which we should strive. Surely God – if there is a God – must be above even the noblest of human aspirations. Indeed, it would be only a barbaric myth that tells of a wrathful god ordering up the bloody death of an innocent man in order to slake his thirst for justice. Gandhi himself is famously quoted as saying, "An eye for an eye will eventually leave the whole world blind." I'm sure you could find plenty of people up on Union Square who like Gandhi better than God. Their persistent question has been, why would God stoop to the level of an eye-for-an-eye and a tooth-for-a-tooth and require the death of Jesus? Why couldn't God simply forgive us our sins? Why couldn't God just wipe out our sins? The question is and always has been a good one. What follows will be my attempt to answer it, but you will have to bear with me.

The first thing I would say is that yes indeed, God does freely, and completely, and without strings attached forgive us our sins. But consider this: whenever forgiveness is required, a loss is involved and someone has to bear it. Where does the loss go? It has to go somewhere. Let me suggest to you that until it does, it prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Someone always has to pay the price, to foot the bill of what has been lost. Here is a father whose young son is murdered. His grief is so crushing that he tries to ease the burden through revenge. But an eye-for-an-eye serves to double the loss, adding guilt to grief, and the burden of them is intolerable. Now he not only has to grieve his son, but raise another child according to a religion he finds objectionable. The loss is the father's to bear, to absorb, to pay, to feel. Here is someone else who in good faith invested a life savings with a reputable firm that turns out to be nothing more than a pyramid scheme. When the whole thing comes crashing down, and all the money evaporates, does everyone move on and say, "Oh well; easy come, easy go?" Of course not. Even after all the prison sentences are handed out and law suits are filed, many people are still going to eat the loss and feel the pain.

Here is a woman at her 25th high school reunion who comes face-to-face with a classmate who relentlessly bullied and belittled her. The former bully confesses that she's felt enormous guilt for the way she acted, and asks for forgiveness. The woman remembers that the bullying was so bad it drove her into depression and robbed her of enjoying her teenage years. Can the former bully restore what should have been a happy period of the woman's life? No, the bully cannot. Even if the woman forgives, her high school years were still a loss that she alone has had to absorb. Someone always has to eat the loss.

I've often thought that one of the great movies of all time is *Animal House*, starring John Belushi and Tim Matheson. The film is about the totally immoral and irresponsible residents of Delta House, a fraternity known for wreaking havoc on the stately campus of Faber College.

Dean Wormer finally succeeds in expelling them all, but they won't go away – not without exacting a price. The final scene of the movie is the college parade, complete with marching bands and floats. For their contribution, the Delta House boys have turned their car into a giant wedding cake float, with large script on the side of it reading, “Eat Me.” The float prowls around town, crashes through the parade, and eventually takes aim at the reviewing stand, where Dean Wormer and other dignitaries sit. As Dean Wormer sees the giant cake speeding towards him, he says, “I hate those guys.” You can accuse me a reading too much into the movie, and you'd probably be right. But I take the cake float smashing through town and destroying everything in its path to represent unresolved, unabsorbed sin and loss and grief spinning out of control and seeking a target. “Eat me,” it says. Someone is going to have to eat the loss.

How completely understandable it would have been for Jesus to look down on the soldiers, and out at everyone responsible for his death and say, “I hate those guys.” Instead he prayed, “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*” When I survey the wondrous cross, I am moved for different reasons in different years. And I am grateful that the church has never mandated one and only one interpretation of the saving work of Christ upon the cross. What I see this year is how God, who takes away the sins of the world, eats the collective loss – world without end. Amen. God isn't punishing sin; God is eating the loss. This is God on the cross. Good Friday is not good without Christmas. The atonement is not possible without the Incarnation. This is God on the cross, feeling the pain, absorbing the loss, footing the bill. It's not that God stands aloof and apart, watching an innocent man pay the price for the sins of the whole world. It's not that before the cross God did not love us, and now after the cross – Presto! – God loves and forgives us. No. The cross doesn't cause God's love. The cross reveals the depths of God's love, and what it costs God to forgive the sins of the whole world.

The other day I was riding my bike along East 10th Street, and came upon a Russian Orthodox Church at Avenue A across from Tompkins Square Park. In numerous places the church is adorned with the distinct form of the Russian Orthodox cross. The Russian Orthodox cross, like the crosses we see here at Grace Church, consists of the large vertical beam that aligned with Jesus' body, and the horizontal beam upon which he stretched out his arms. But the Russian Orthodox cross includes two smaller cross pieces as well, one just above the central, horizontal beam, and the other down where Jesus' feet would be. The small bar on top is set at a right angle to the vertical beam, and represents the inscription that Pilate had put on the cross to mock Jesus, reading: “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” The second little cross bar towards the bottom represents the block to which they nailed Jesus' feet. This piece is not at a right angle to the vertical beam, but slanted to one side. I remembered how someone once told that the bottom bar is slanted to show that when Jesus, on the cross, needed to lift his body for a breath, he would have to press down hard on one foot. The bottom cross bar is slanted still to show that the suffering of Jesus continues still, as God in Christ foots the bill.

Someone always has to eat the loss. This is God on the cross, footing the bill for the sins of the whole world, and praying, “*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.*”

Therefore, kind Jesus, since I cannot pay thee,
I do adore thee, and will ever pray thee,
think on thy pity and thy love unswerving,
not my deserving. *Johann Heermann (1585-1647)*