

WILT THOU FORGIVE *THAT* SIN?

The Rev. J. Donald Waring

Grace Church in New York

Good Friday + March 30, 2018

The Seven Last Words of Christ: The First Word

And when they came to the place which is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on the right and one on the left. And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:33-34)

At one point in my growing up years I was the proud possessor of a rectangular fish tank that held about 3 gallons of water. At the school fair I had played the game in which you toss a ping pong ball toward some tiered shelves full of little glass bowls, each one with a goldfish inside. If your ball went into the bowl, you took the fish home in a plastic bag full of water. Well, the ball bounced in my favor and I won a fish. I put the fish in the tank and gave it the imaginative name, Goldy. The next morning we went to the pet store to obtain proper goldfish food, and also a solution to treat the water to ensure that Goldy would flourish. And flourish Goldy did for a whole year. He grew perhaps three times his original size, and because he was alone in the tank with no other fish nipping at him, his fins were long and luxurious.

By the time of the next school fair I was a year older – and a year wiser too, or so I thought. I realized I could simply reach over the wall and drop the ping pong ball into the bowl I wanted. What is more, I noticed that some bowls contained more than one fish. So my plan was to win as many companions for Goldy as I possibly could. Sure enough, I came home with about six more goldfish. Into the tank they went to join Goldy, my old familiar friend. I poured some extra solution into the tank to treat the water for the extra fish. Then, even before I could serve them their first meal as a family, all of them rolled over sideways, and floated to the surface, quite dead. They were finished. I was stunned. In an instant I'd gone from having it all to losing it all. I remember staring at Goldy's lifeless form, especially his luxurious fins that now hung limply and would swim no more, and feeling for the first time a heavy weight on my young shoulders. It was the weight of guilt and sin. I had done this, and nothing I could do would undo what I had done.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John record that on the first Good Friday, Jesus spoke seven phrases from the cross. These have come to be called "The Seven Last Words of Christ," and tradition has assigned the first of them to come from the Gospel of Luke: "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" According to Luke's chronology, Jesus spoke these words right 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 an overwhelming, destructive reality: the reality of sin. All of us are entangled in it. Looking back now all these years, I understand my experience at the fish tank to be that sin where I began to realize my own complicity in causing the creation to groan in travail. "A sin?" you wonder. Was it really a sin? I was a child who didn't know what he was doing. They were fish given away at a school fair, or sold a dime for a dozen at any pet store. "Oh well, tomorrow is another day," is what I should have said. "Easy come, easy go," might have been my mantra as I turned the page and began the next chapter of childhood. "Out of sight, out of mind," should have been what I concluded after I flushed all the fish down the toilet. Thus I reasoned with myself. The problem was, I still felt the weight of guilt and sin on my shoulders long after the fish were out of sight. Those creatures were under my care, and I had rained death upon them.

The poison that I poured into the fish tank was a tiny sampling of the poison we all pour into the world: into the creation itself, into our relationships with family and friends, into the rancor we feel toward foes and strangers. If we try to view the way things are these days through God's eyes, then we see how completely we have 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, 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, perfect, and sufficient 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. Justice is served. On the cross, mercy and truth meet together. Righteousness and peace kiss each other. 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. 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. So the persistent question has been, why would God stoop to a level that strikes us as beneath what we admire in certain saintly figures? 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.

What 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. Last fall a pair of crimes struck so close to Grace Church that no one in this community could abide by any easy talk of forgiveness. First, a depraved terrorist raced a truck down a nearby stretch of the Hudson River bike path that many of us ride and walk, killing seven unsuspecting cyclists. The very next morning a man who had been stalking Elizabeth Lee Herman, a much-loved administrator at Grace Church High School, approached her as she parked her Citi Bike and shot her to death before shooting himself in an attempt to take his own life.

In both of these crimes the perpetrators survived. Concerning the murder across the street from the high school, I heard a sentiment expressed more than once: that it was good the shooter survived, because now he has to suffer. Now he has to suffer the physical wounds he inflicted on himself, the emotional duress of his guilt, and the scorn of society. The desire to see him suffer is a raw cry for justice. The loss has to go somewhere. Someone has to pay the price. Let it be the perpetrators of these two crimes. But can they ever pay the price? Can they ever restore what they have stolen? Can they ever be forgiven?

The Adult Education Committee and I thought it would be timely to talk about the limits of forgiveness at a Sunday Forum. We did just that on February 11th, ironically three days before the shooting rampage at the Florida high school left 17 people dead. Once again, the perpetrator survived, and now we hear calls for the death penalty. Even if capital punishment is imposed, it could never be enough. One life for seventeen does not balance the scales of justice. Nikolas Cruz

can never repay what he has stolen. Those who have lost their loved ones now must spend the rest of their lives not only swimming through grief, but also avoiding the poisoned waters of anger, rage, and hatred. The burden they have to bear is intolerable.

How completely understandable it would have been for Jesus to look down on the soldiers, and out at everyone responsible for his death and respond in kind with anger, even hatred, thus pouring more poison into the water. 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. What I see this year is how God, who takes away the sins of the world, absorbs the collective loss – world without end. Amen. God isn't punishing sin; God is absorbing 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, taking the poison of human hatred into himself. It's not that God stands aloof and apart, watching an innocent man suffer 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. God forgives first, then bears on his shoulders the consequences of forgiveness. That's what we're seeing today. But will it ever end?

Wilt Thou forgive that sin, where I begun,
Which is my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt Thou forgive those sins through which I run,
And do run still, though still I do deplore?
When Thou hast done, Thou hast not done,
For I have more.¹

Not far from here, on the northwest corner of Tompkins Square Park, you will see a Russian Orthodox Church. 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 recall how someone once explained 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, thus increasing his agonies. The bottom cross bar remains slanted to show that the suffering of Jesus continues still, as God in Christ eternally foots the bill to reconcile the world to himself. Someone always has to absorb the loss.

O Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world,
Have mercy upon us.
O Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world,
Have mercy upon us.
O Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world,
Grant us thy peace.²

+

¹ From "A Hymn to God the Father," by John Donne (1572-1631)

² From The Book of Common Prayer, 1979, p. 337.