



ST BART'S

A Meditation by

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“Father, Forgive Them”

*Meditation preached at the Three Hour Service 12 noon to 3 o'clock, April 18, 2014
Good Friday, Based on Luke 23:32-35*

In my world that is not how it works. I ask others to acknowledge their wrong, appreciate the damage that they have done to me and ask for my forgiveness before I feel obligated to forgive them—and even then, depending on what the crime was, I permit myself a reasonable period of time before coming around to forgive them. The problem with this world, my world, is that it is filled with anger and resentment. Aren't you glad we don't live in my world?

Jesus asks God to forgive his assassins while they are still trying to kill him. This should be no surprise to us. After all, Jesus is the one who told the story of the radically loving father, better known as the story of the Prodigal Son. Have you ever noticed how by calling that story the story of the prodigal son we focus the reader's attention on us? It is the way we view the world most of the time. How does it impact us? Or in my world, how does it impact me?

In focusing the story on the son and his prodigal ways we are to take comfort in the fact that we can always turn our life around. No matter how bad it gets we can return home and know that God will always take us back in. But in the end that interpretation misses the point of the story and minimizes its impact. That interpretation robs the story of its true power. For you see, in the story of the son, his recognition of his situation and realization that he could have a better life living as a servant in the house of the father ultimately bring about change. In real life when I am drowning in sin, I don't even know how bad it is, let alone have the good sense to formulate a successful plan to change. I am talking about real sin, not eating a few cookies during Lent, but the soul crushing, life sapping, self destructive, hurtful-to-others sin. And when I am engaged in real sin I do not have a clue. I do not have a clue about how hurtful I am to others or how hurtful I am to myself, and therefore I have no knowledge of my need to change. Even when the self-destructive part catches up with me and I am hurting, I haven't a clue on my own how to overcome sin. This cluelessness in my experience is not unique to me—not much about my experience is unique, no matter what I may think—but rather this cluelessness is part of the human experience of sin.

For the most part when we are drowning in sin we don't know what we are doing, and we certainly don't know how to bring about change. Like Adam and Eve in the story of the Garden of Eden, when we sin we sew garments out of the fig leaves of excuses and rationalizations to hide our sin and to hide ourselves. Realizing the fact of my own helplessness in the face of sin has often led me to try to do better, and that usually doesn't turn out so well. No matter how hard I work at it and no matter what I do to forget how bad it is, my sin always is with me.

Instead of focusing on the son, if we focus on the radically transformational love of the father we learn something about God and the love of God. God's love does not wait to hear our rationalizations and excuses. God's love does not even wait for us to stop doing the wrong things we do and repent. God's love is what makes God's world God's world and not my world. In God's world the father loves the son. Period. Full Stop. In the context of God's love, my limited transactional understanding of forgiveness is just that limited. It is the reason I am always trying to get better and trying to stop. It is the reason I never get better and never stop.

By telling Jesus' story focusing on the father's love, love that freely forgives all things, we focus on the power that can transform our lives. This love is not transactional but rather transformational. Forgiveness for Jesus is not about atonement or penance or seeking forgiveness; it does not even depend on knowledge on the part of

the sinner of his or her own sinfulness. Notice that on Good Friday Jesus does not even wait until the crime is over before he starts working on forgiveness. This is indeed difficult.

After all, if the sinners do not know that they are sinning how can I know that they won't do it again? Did you notice how quickly we slipped back into my world? It may not be pretty, but it is the world that I know best. The funny thing is that my world is the world where I always end up clueless and drowning in sin. It is the reason that when someone else is hurting me, I demand a way to know that they will not hurt me again. My world is so limited. Left unchallenged in my world, I am full of anger and resentment, hiding under fig leaves of rationalizations and excuses.

In God's world, Jesus knows that forgiveness, giving up our right to resentment and anger, does not need to wait for sinners to get a clue. If it did, the world would be filled with God's anger and resentment, and that world would not be a pretty place at all. But that is not the way God's world works. The amazing thing about God's world is that God knows that we will sin again, and he forgives us and loves us. God forgives us and loves us.

Once Jesus was asked by the disciples how many times they should forgive one another. Seven times? He said, "No, not seven times but seventy times seven!" Imagine how much simpler our lives would be if we could give up our worlds and live our lives in God's world.

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