

St. Bartholomew's Church
THE THREE HOURS
First Meditation Luke 23:32-34

The last time I preached on these words I took great comfort in observing that Jesus asked God to forgive his murderers, not mentioning any desire on his part to forgive them. Victims of other heinous crimes were on my mind. They often report that the imperative to forgive their perpetrators in some ways re-victimizes them. I get that. Over eager therapists, helpers, priests trying to rush victims to healing sometimes just make it worse.

We, of course, can't know what was in the heart of Jesus when he uttered these words, or for that matter precisely the words he uttered. But in my heart I do believe that Jesus desired their forgiveness. The overriding details of his life, despite being attributed a comment here or there about sheep and goats and wheat and tares as categories—one good, one not so good—bare witness to the primacy of forgiveness. “70 times seven,” he told Peter when pushed to say how many times to forgive. “Let he who has no sin cast the first stone,” he told an obnoxiously pious group of religious leaders who were chomping at the bit to punish a woman caught in adultery.

I hold this to be true: that somewhere near the heart of God resides the insistence of forgiveness, insistence being indeed the word I mean.

And it is big business too. Forgiveness that is. Amazon has so many books on forgiveness that they have a top ten list! Can you imagine? Here are just a few of their best sellers:

Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve

Getting Rid of the Gorilla: Confessions on the Struggle to Forgive

Forgiveness Is a Choice

The Art of Forgiving

Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving

Total Forgiveness

Forgiving our Parents; Forgiving Ourselves

The admonition to forgive ourselves is huge, and I know how important it is. It truly is. But occasionally, I want to say, “Hold on there, Skippy or Buffy or Whoever, I am not so sure you need to forgive yourself just yet. A moment or two of responsible guilt might not be such a bad thing—like maybe it could help you change and do better in the future! At such moments, I am reminded of how long it has been since I went to seminary. I may need a refresher course in Pastoral Care 101!

I haven't read all these books, not many of them, in fact, okay none of them. I could write them and so could you because we know that there is truth in the claim that great psychological damage comes to us when we refuse to forgive—and not psychological effects but physical ones as

well. I know what the knot of unforgiving feels like in the pit of my stomach and at the back of my heart. It hurts, and it burns like hell—and is quite like hell I think. In the early days immediately after the hurt, whatever the event was, it is all we can think about; and sadly as we live with it awhile and sometimes for a long while, rather than its fading away, we process everything through the lens of the hurt that is not forgiven, that hurt which for some reason we cannot let go, don't want to let go.

So there are two points very briefly that I want to make. Human forgiveness, our forgiving of one another, is all about us. As in so many things about a godly life, living as God wants us to is good for us. Forgiving others is good for us, not just our souls, though that for sure, but good for our bodies. Everything is lighter about us when we let go a grudge. There is no magic in doing it; as all the books say, it takes both the passage of a little time and the decision against living with a clog of hurt and anger, no matter how much we cherish it and deserve to get to feel it. In a way, in fact a way that is derived from our very humanness, our decision to forgive is a decision based on our self-interest—and that is a good thing. Nothing is gained by holding on to the grievance. Far from being made better, healthier, or more sanctimonious by it, it ages us and makes us bitter and even sometimes quite ill.

And the second point has to do with divine forgiveness. Some see forgiveness as always conditional, that it is meted out only upon an act of contrition and the willingness for and even

evidence of repentance, turning from the “wicked way” as the old language suggests. God forgives those who desire to be forgiven, those who desire to change that for which they seek forgiveness. In this view, there is no forgiveness for those who are unrepentant and fail to confess and ask to be forgiven. Those who hold this view say that God is sad, but they don’t seem to really mean it. In fact, this view of God makes religious people hard; it always has. And in it, I do not believe there is life. It places others and us in the hands of a God, some version of whom, no matter how mitigated, accepts as inevitable the loss, the “otherness” of some of God’s creation, the ultimate collateral damage of life we might say.

I do not accept that view of God, choosing, potentially wrongly, to see God as not only somehow mysteriously synonymous with love but also with forgiveness. A god who ultimately cannot or chooses not to forgive according to some formula is as foreign to my notion of God as a god who loves only the worthy, only those who subscribe to one way of understanding, only those who pray and worship in just one way. Does that really sound like the God you want to know and give your life to?

Father, forgive them.

In my heart, where deepest knowing occurs, I *know* that God did.