



ST BART'S

A MEDITATION by:

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“Father, Forgive Them”

A meditation preached on March 29, 2013

Good Friday: The Three Hour Service from 12 noon to 3 o'clock

Based on Luke 23:32-35

We've come to the most somber day in our church year: the day we remember and reflect on Jesus' crucifixion and its meaning. That Jesus was crucified is a matter of historical record. Its meanings, and they are multiple, each of us will have to decide for ourself.

Here at St. Bart's, we observe this day with services from early morning to evening and an opportunity for confessions in the Chapel immediately after this service. It's our tradition to offer this three-hour service on Good Friday. This service is sometimes called The Seven Last Words from the Cross, because we explore through meditation, music and silence each of the seven expressions traditionally attributed to Jesus during his crucifixion. These seven “words” are gathered from the four canonical Gospels.

Several people have asked me how preachers and “words” get linked for this service. It's something I'd like for you to know. We start by asking the seven preachers: do you have any particular preference? Usually several preachers find themselves strongly drawn to one particular last word, for reasons they can't really explain. And usually several preachers find themselves not so strongly drawn to one, but open to all. So far it's always worked out without fisticuffs or the need for unseemly clerical discipline. Those of us who believe and speak in these terms see a gentle movement of the Holy Spirit involved here.

There are other ways to make the assignments, but I like the spaciousness and graciousness of our process. I believe that whatever happens here today somehow reflects that spaciousness and graciousness, and that we are all part of it.

Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.

This year I found myself drawn to this word, for reasons I could not articulate, but I suspect had to do with my own struggles with forgiveness—struggles presented daily, if not hourly. The more I wrestled with this text, the more uncomfortable I got.

This “word” occurs only in the Gospel of Luke. Luke's elegant writing describes the crucifixion simply in one sentence, without gruesome details. We can imagine well enough the physical and emotional horrors of being nailed to a cross. With the details Luke does give, we know the extra shame of being executed with criminals. The soldiers who are dividing the last of his earthly possessions, seemingly oblivious to his suffering. The people just standing by watching. We know that Jesus is mocked/scoffed/taunted by the leaders—and a few verses later also by the soldiers and even one of the criminals.

Who is Jesus actually praying for? The Roman soldiers? The Jewish leaders? The people? The criminal? Even his own disciples who had deserted him, and one of them who had betrayed him? At first glance it seems that Jesus was clearly praying for the soldiers who had actually crucified him. But on further study and reflection, it appears that Jesus was asking forgiveness for all who were involved in his death.

Forgiveness is defined as the giving up of/ceasing to feel resentment or anger for a perceived offense. Said another way: Forgiveness is releasing the desire to punish someone or yourself for an offense.

Sometimes it's not so clear whom we need to forgive

And there is a danger in forgiving too quickly. More than one therapist I know counsels that first, we must let ourselves feel our authentic anger—claim it, if you will—before we can begin to forgive.

Given who Jesus was, he could have called down legions of angels to bring vengeance on all of them. Instead he pulls himself up and, with all his strength, offers a prayer on behalf of those who mocked and crucified him.

It is natural to be angry, to want to strike back, to get even when someone does us wrong. It's not so natural to choose not to take revenge. If someone hits you with a stick, you have the impulse to hit them back. That's the basis for wars.

Studies have shown that revenge increases stress and impairs health and immunity. To thrive personally and as a human race, we have to resist this predictable lust for revenge and find ways to right wrongs more positively. It's not about being a pushover; it's refusing to act in a destructive way that will prevent peace.

As Confucius says, "Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves."

"For they do not know what they are doing." Does that mean we forgive only those who don't know what they are doing? What about those who harm us deliberately?

When Jesus says, "They do not know what they are doing," he brings into the picture compassion. Compassion (from the Latin meaning "to suffer together with") is understanding or empathy for the suffering of others. Compassion is fundamental to human love, and foundational to the survival of the human race.

One stunning example of compassion was cited by our Bishop, Andrew Dietsche, at a recent Diocese of New York priests' conference. Bishop Dietsche reminded us of the man who, in 2006, stormed into a one-room schoolhouse of the Amish in Lancaster County, PA, and shot ten young Amish girls, killing five of them.

The Amish responded immediately with acts of forgiveness. Members of the Amish community, including families who had just buried their daughters the day before, went to the killer's burial service at the cemetery. They hugged the killer's widow and other members of the killer's family. A year later, that Amish community had donated money to the killer's widow and her three young children.

It might appear that the Amish forgave too quickly. The Bishop pointed out to us that the Amish were able to make the response they did because they had learned and practiced forgiveness literally all of their lives. When the worst happened, they didn't have to ask to have Bibles and theology texts brought to them, so they could study and figure out how they should respond. Their response—their witness—came naturally out of what they had learned and practiced from the earliest ages. Their response—their witness—was literally part of them.

Would our faith, our learning, our practice allow us to make the same response, the same witness?

Forgiveness is not easy. It's not "natural" without a lot of practice.

But it's what Jesus models for us. It's what God models.

And it's the only way forward.

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