

April 19, 2019
Eastern Shore Chapel, Virginia Beach, VA
Good Friday (RCL/C)
A sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

From the cross Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."¹

But forgive who?

Pilate?

The Executioners?

The Chief Priests?

The Violent Mob?

The fearful disciples who abandoned him?

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

But why forgive? Why? Because Jesus did? Right, but there is more.

Back in the early 1970s during my undergraduate days I was a member of an evangelical campus group by the name of Peace One Way, commonly known as POW. The basic tenet of our group was that peace was attainable in only one way: through Jesus Christ. At almost every weekly gathering of our fellowship we sang a Jimmy and Carol Owens song titled "Come Together." I really liked the song, partially because it tickled my blues music need for a syncopated rhythm. The song had a good 4/4 beat and, as they used to say in the old, old days of Dick Clark's daily afternoon TV program American Bandstand, "You can dance to it."

Also, I liked the song because within the words of this song there was something very powerful about what it means to be God's people in the body of Christ.

"Jesus People come together, let your light shine!
Share your love with one another, let your light shine!
Let no difference grow between you, let your light shine!
Let His spirit flow between you, let your light shine!
Oh let it shine, shine, shine. Let your light shine.
Let it shine, shine, shine. Let your light shine."²

"Let no difference grow between you, let your light shine!"

¹ Luke 23:34, NIV.

² <http://www.jimmyandcarolowens.com/store/music/come-together/>. Accessed 4/18/2019.

I knew back then what I know now. If there is difference and distance between two or more people, it is likely due to a refusal to forgive; likely due to a human desire to hold a grudge; to get even. When there is a refusal to forgive the light of God is not shining. There is only darkness between you. When the darkness is more prevalent than the light, evil has the upper hand.

That day on Calvary, there was a lot of darkness. Jesus was the only light they had. In the midst of the darkest hour, Jesus ignites the light of forgiveness asking his God and Father to forgive those who were killing him and those who had abandoned him.

Tonight Passover begins. This evening after sundown within Jerusalem and around the world Jewish households will gather for a meal marking the first day of the weeklong celebration "Passover" from captivity and slavery.³ Where my wife and I live in Sandbridge a remarkable Passover exodus is occurring today. Hundreds of religious Jews will travel to Sandbridge from distant places to rental houses where they will spend the Passover feast with members of their families – often large families.

The Passover celebration is a time of acknowledging God's faithfulness and goodness to God's people. Yet, we all know that when families gather and spend time with one another that there are the occasional tense moments when forgiveness needs to play a huge role in our family relationships. I am going to tell you a story about such family relationships.

In Israel there is an organization by the name of Parents Circle. The requirements for membership in the organization are two in number. The first requirement is relatively easy. You have to be the parent of a son or a daughter. Easy, right? However, the second requirement is very difficult and costly. Directly I shall get to that second requirement of membership.

Two years ago while I was the spiritual leader for a pilgrimage in the Holy Land I was able to arrange a meeting for our pilgrims with two members of the Parents Circle. Two parents came: an Israeli father and a Palestinian father. The Israeli father was a Jew who had served as an officer in the Israeli Defense Force, the Israeli army. The Palestinian father was an Arab Muslim who had been part of the Hamas military wing. Put simply Israel hates Hamas, and Hamas hates Israel. Because of that long standing hatred, my Israeli and Palestinian fathers said that they had grown up being taught to hate one another.

I promised that I'd come back to the difficult and costly second qualification for membership in the Parents Circle. One of your children has to have been killed in the ongoing Palestinian/Israeli conflict.

The Israeli father and his wife once had a daughter, an eighteen year old young woman who was a student and who with her friends at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem liked

³ Exodus 12-13. NRSV.

to frequent a particular sidewalk café. One day while in the café, his daughter and her friends stopped off to have a moment of refreshment between classes. While they were there a Palestinian woman who wore an explosives vest beneath her dress entered the café. Once in the center of the café she detonated the explosives that were wrapped around her body. The daughter, all of her friends, and a number of innocent bystanders were killed by the explosion. The daughter's body was so badly mangled that she had to be identified by her dental records.

The Palestinian father and his wife once had a sixteen year old son. The young man and some of his friends had been in the Israel town of Hebron. They were walking down a side street of the downtown area onto the Main Street. Approaching the Main Street they could hear the sound of feet running on pavement and of people yelling. Being curious teenagers they hastened to quickly get out in the open to see what was going on. The sound they heard was the sound of Hamas protestors throwing rocks and Molotov cocktails at Israeli Defense Force soldiers in a pitched confrontation. Just as the 16 year old was out open taking in all of the excitement, an Israeli Defense Force rifle round was fired that struck him in the head and took his life.

For several years the Israeli father and the Palestinian father said they had nursed their hatred of one another. Describing their emotional journey, each talked about the amount of time devoted to plotting ways of getting even. For a time their hatred was so intense that not even an "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" would have been satisfying. Yet, over time each began to learn lessons about the personal cost of carrying the burden of hatred. Quite separately, each parent began to hope that something would enable them to reach the day when soldiers were not shooting their sons and terrorists were not detonating explosives that killed their daughters.

When they heard about the Parents Circle and a seminar that was being held near their homes in East Jerusalem, quite cautiously they decided to attend. When they did, they heard from parents whose children, like theirs, had been killed in the conflict. They were reminded that at one point in their early lives both had embraced spiritual principles that gave value to life, particularly to the innocent.

Over a period of one year they kept coming back to the Parents Circle seminars. Then one evening they met. At some point and for some reason, a point in time and a reason neither could precisely define, they felt secure enough to tell their stories to each other. Each heard the other say that since they were small children each had been taught to distrust the the other, and that within their distrust hatred had found fertile ground and had taken root.

It didn't happen over night, but in time these two fathers found the grace to forgive. In their case, forgiveness was a direct result of the will to tell their stories and to own their responsibilities for fanning the fires of distrust and hatred.

Today as this pair of parents goes out to tell their stories, they pause at the midpoint of their talk to say how now they are closer to each other than if had they been blood

brothers. Though neither father was an exclusive follower of Jesus, they had taken on and embodied Jesus' word from the cross, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." That's important because forgiveness will never be confined to one particular religious group or culture or race. Forgiveness is the universal language of reconciliation.

The movement of forgiveness and reconciliation began at Mount Calvary when Jesus spoke from the cross as he was dying. Jesus' death upon a cross was more than an execution. The Roman occupation government used it as a weapon of terror. The pain was intense, slow and degrading. It was meant to be a signal to all who passed by that they too could end up this way.

But while on the cross Jesus refuses to give in to the meanness and arrogance that surround him. When Jesus uttered his prayerful proclamation of forgiveness, he broke the cycle of cruelty and put the Good into the Friday of his death.

Sisters and brothers we should be thankful that Jesus used the non-specific word "them" in his plea for forgiveness. Who gets included in this Jesus request to his Father?

Did "forgive them" include Pilate, who knew the right thing to do, but was swayed by an informal opinion poll of his base?

Did "forgive them" include the executioners who actually placed Jesus on the cross, who would defend themselves by saying that they were only following orders?

Did "forgive them" include the chief priests who acquiesced to the crucifixion justifying their action by saying that their vocation was to maintain the status quo?

Did "forgive them" include the people who were part of the mob who shouted out to crucify him; who gave up their individuality to be an invisible part of the group?

Did "forgive them" include Jesus' disciples who went into hiding for fear of ending up the same way as their leader?

There is only one answer: YES, YES and YES. Truly, it is as sometimes we sing, "There's a wideness in God's mercy." Out of the horror of the cross comes the good news that is sung from the choir loft to the chancel, from the streets into the shops, from the shore to the mountains and even into the highest levels of the cruelest governments of our country and world.

Between 7 September 1940 and 21 May 1941 the German Luftwaffe conducted major aerial attacks in which hundreds of thousands of tons of high explosives were dropped upon numerous British cities. Over a period of 267 days (almost 37 weeks), London was attacked 71 times; Birmingham, Liverpool and Plymouth eight times; Bristol six;

Glasgow five; Southampton four; Portsmouth and Hull three; and there was also at least one large raid on another eight cities

The bombs that dropped on the city of London alone struck and destroyed buildings of every kind: office buildings, factories, apartments, homes, museums, government buildings and churches.

Soon after the end of World War II, a group of German students, through kindness and love and a deep desire to return Christian love to those who had lost so much, volunteered to go to London to help rebuild an English cathedral that had been severely damaged by German bombs.

As their work progressed, the students and their leaders became greatly concerned about a large statue of Jesus, whose arms were outstretched and beneath which was the written inscription from Matthew 11:28: "Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

The student volunteer workers had a significant challenge: how to repair the hands, which had been completely destroyed. They worked and worked and tried and tried, but nothing seemed to successfully replace Jesus' outstretched hands.

Finally, after several frustrating and unsuccessful efforts, they decided to let the hands of Jesus remain missing and they changed the written inscription to read this way: "Christ has no hands but ours."

If ever forgiveness is to become real and realized, we will have to act. Though, as Jesus verified from the cross, God is the author of forgiveness, we are the actors who have to live that out. Jimmy and Carol Owens knew that when they sang, "Let no difference come between you, let your light shine." Israeli and Palestinian parents learned that the only remedy for the heavy burden of hatred is forgiveness. Some German students learned that though personally they dropped not one bomb on England, they had to seek forgiveness through their outstretched hands.

I think the Apostle Paul had it right: "...in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us."⁴

AMEN.

⁴ Romans 5:8, NRSV.