

**“FATHER, FORGIVE THEM....”**  
James S. Currie

Robert Paul was a professor of church history at Austin Seminary when I was a student there. One of his areas of interest was the Westminster Assembly that gathered in London in 1640s to write a Confession of Faith. I do not recall the specific issue he was covering in class that day, but I do recall him saying something to the effect, “Had I been there, I would have taken that particular side.” Dr. Paul paused and then added, “But I would have been wrong.”

With the exception of next week when I will not be here, throughout the season of Lent the sermon texts will come from Jesus’ words from the cross. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” To whom do you suppose Jesus was addressing those words? Was it the Roman soldiers who were the ones at hand who had nailed him to the cross and lifted him up? Was it the Jews who had demanded from Pilate that Barabbas be freed in exchange for Jesus’ execution? Was it the disciples, one of whom had betrayed him to the Roman authorities and another of whom who had denied that he even knew Jesus and the others, most of whom had fled out of fear? Perhaps it was all of these, for they all had contributed to where Jesus was now.

“Father, forgive them....” The trouble with being convinced that one is right is that we just might be wrong. No doubt, the Romans felt justified in crucifying Jesus, for he appeared to be undermining the authority and presence of the occupying Romans. And the Jews were upset with Jesus because he claimed to be the Messiah when he did not

at all correspond to the kind of Messiah they expected. And while Peter had confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, now he seemed to be having doubts and was not sure of the wisdom of being associated with this one who had upset so many.

With hindsight, through the prism of the resurrection, we might say that they were all wrong. However, Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that Pilate, the Roman soldiers, the Jewish authorities were simply doing their jobs. Law and order must be preserved, and that was their job. How do you imagine they would have felt if they had heard Jesus' words, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"? What's there to forgive? They were just doing their job.

As another preacher once put it, the issue is "Can we stand forgiveness?" Can we stand forgiveness, especially when we think we've done nothing wrong? Can we stand forgiveness when we are convinced we are right? Can we stand forgiveness when we were only doing our job? Can we stand forgiveness when we were not even around? Why do we need to be forgiven? Because, as Robert Paul put it, we might be wrong.

But then there's the other side of the story. There are those who know what they have done is wrong, but are surprised at the notion of forgiveness. In the story "Les Miserables" Jean Valjean is convicted and sent to prison for stealing a loaf of bread to give to his starving niece. When he is finally released, he is unable to find work or shelter. He goes from door to door only to have doors slammed in his face. Finally, he comes to the home of the local bishop. The bishop not only lets him in, but treats him to a sumptuous meal on the finest dishes. Still, that night Jean Valjean sneaks out and takes some of the bishop's finest silver with him. When he is caught the next day, the

police return him to the bishop's home. When Jean Valjean claims that the silver was a gift, the bishop agrees and, in fact, asks him why he left behind the two silver candlesticks. After the police leave, Jean Valjean asks the bishop if he is truly free to leave. The bishop wonders out loud if anyone is really free, and suggests to him that "life is to give, not to take."

Jean Valjean is stunned at this unmerited forgiveness that the bishop exhibits. He knows his own guilt, and yet is not sure he can stand forgiveness precisely because he knows he's guilty. The bishop's actions compel Jean Valjean, willingly or not, to experience the kind of unmerited grace God offers us all.

Or consider the story of Joseph and his brothers. You recall how Joseph was the son of Jacob and Rachel. He was Jacob's favorite. He had dreams that one day his brothers would bow down to him. Of course, when he shared these dreams with his brothers, they were hardly impressed or overjoyed. Eventually, they sold him to some Egyptian travelers, but told their father that Joseph had been attacked and killed by a wild animal. Meanwhile, over the years Joseph rose in influence in the court of the pharaoh. When, years later, famine came to the region, Joseph had wisely advised the pharaoh to set aside grain in anticipation, so that people would not starve. The famine reached Joseph's family back in Canaan and they came to Egypt to get food. At first, Joseph recognized his brothers, but they do not recognize him. There is, eventually, a reunion of sorts between Joseph and his brothers and their father, Jacob. Of course, the brothers begin to worry about how Joseph will treat them, given how they had treated him. But Joseph persuades the pharaoh to give them some of the finest land in Egypt. Even so, they fear reprisal from Joseph. But Joseph reassures them with the well-

known words, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, ...” (Gen. 50:19-20a). Unmerited grace.

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” They are not aware of their own misguided notions. They are not aware of their own arrogance. They are not aware of their own self-centeredness. They are not aware of the harmful effect their words and actions have on others. They insist on their own way. They are afraid to be confronted with the truth. They don’t seem to listen to anyone but themselves.

“But,” Jesus might have gone on, “they are mine. As peculiar as they are, as strange and as ornery as they can be, I love them and give myself to them and for them. They can disagree with each other, they can fight with each other. They can hurt each other, and oh, how I wish they wouldn’t do so. I have tried to show them what it means to love each other, to serve each other, to see you, O God, in each other, but so often they don’t seem to get it. But I will not give up on them.” Perhaps something like that lies at the heart of Jesus’ words, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

In this season of Lent, rather than giving anything up something, maybe we could think about how we can embrace others, especially those with whom we disagree, how we might see in them something other than whatever it is that may cause us pain and discomfort. It’s not easy. God knows, it’s not easy. But when we begin to understand the unconditional grace and acceptance God has been extended to us, then how can we not share that with others? It’s not a matter of being forgiven and then freed to go our merry way. In W. H. Auden’s play “For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio” at one point he has Herod say, “Every corner-boy will congratulate himself: ‘I’m such a sinner

that God had to come down in person to save me. I must be a devil of a fellow.' Every crook will argue: 'I like committing crimes. God likes forgiving them. Really the world is admirably arranged'" (Auden, *Collected Poems*, p. 303).

We share God's grace and love by working for God's peace and justice in this world. We do so by welcoming the stranger, whoever he or she might be. We do so by committing ourselves to God's kingdom day-by-day. It's not easy. Most of us wake up every morning needing God's grace all over again, but we can do that because we belong to a God who so loved the world that God gave God's only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Thanks be to God!