**Forgive Them
Good Friday, April 2, 2021, All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman**

**Reading: Luke 23:26–43**

*I am from chaos and confusion.*

*I am from my father’s lap, crawling down after he’s passed out.*

*I am from a pony bottle of Miller Genuine Draft.*

*I am from a closet where I hide from my father.*

*I am from a bathroom watching the blood from the needle shoot to the ceiling*

*I am from a highway to hell on an early Saturday morning.*

*I am from dark alleys and early days.*

*I am from my kids crawling out of my lap after I nodded out.*

*I am from the smell of alcohol on many men.*

*I am from addiction.*

*I am from scorched Hamburger Helper that my babies had to eat.*

*I am from a life of one to a life of many.*

*I am from total bleakness to pure light.*

*I am from dying to recovering.*

*I am from anger to forgiveness.*

*I am from being nothing to being everything.*

*I am from bondage to freedom.*

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*“And then Jesus said, “My God, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”*

I cringe when I hear the word “forgiveness.”

I cringe and brace myself inside for what is to follow.

For I have seen that word used far more often to wound than to heal.

To enslave than to liberate.

To suppress truth than to speak it out loud.

There is a trap in the simplicity of the Gospel reading we just heard.

Jesus, naked before the crowd and nailed to the cross, in agony and humiliation, says of his tormentors who will soon be his murderers, “*My God, forgive them; for they know not what they do.:”*

Taken by itself, it is a snapshot and a sound bite that tells us nothing of the journey that Jesus took to arrive at those words, or the journey that the community of Matthew had taken to realize they needed to be included in this story.

“My God, forgive them,” Jesus says. Perhaps, we read it with the words rolling off his tongue from the cross like he is a cop tearing up a parking ticket. Or perhaps we read it like the act of a superhero, one that only could come from someone not limited as we are by the constraints of ordinary humanity.

And yet, it is Jesus who says these words.

Jesus, whom we are supposed to follow and emulate.

And so, sound bite becomes commandment, without any recognition of the weight not only of those words but how fraught the journey is to forgiveness and beyond.

I cringe when I hear the word “forgiveness.”

I cringe and brace myself for what is to follow.

I cringe because forgiveness is too often yet one more burden placed on the victim

One more weapon used by the dominator.

One more strategy to make sure the systems that oppress and wound and kill stay exactly the same.

You have to forgive.

You have to be like Jesus.

Turn the other cheek.

If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.

I can smack you as hard as I want … but you … you’re a Christian … you have to be like Jesus …

You have to forgive me.

It is, of course, a deep perversion of the words and person of Jesus. The taming, whitewashing and metamorphasizing of a revolutionary leader into a chaplain of Empire.

In their book, Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism, South African theologians Curtis DeYoung and Allan Boesak write:

*“Sometime after yesterday and before today, (Jesus’) life story was co-opted, reconfigured, and reissued. The story of a colonized and occupied Jesus was replaced with a meek and mild savior who did not disrupt the status quo or with the image of a colonial Christ who sided with the powerful and blessed imperial realities.”*

One of the most powerful tools Empire has used is the separation of the ideas of forgiveness and justice.

First, forgiveness became an individual act demanded of victims supposedly for their own liberation and thus conveniently unconcerned with the systems that oppress, enslave and wound.

Then, perhaps even worse, forgiveness has come to mean reducing justice to vengeance and in the name of obedience to Christ releasing any demands for either.

And this is perhaps the deepest wound that has been caused – that the idea of actual justice … and the integral role forgiveness plays in it … has disappeared more and more from the conversation.

Because if forgiveness truly is nothing but the empty shell that demands everything of the victim but nothing of the perpetrator. If forgiveness truly is nothing but the swallowing of the pain and the suppressing of the truth, then it is certainly worthy of discarding. And yet, if we

take forgiveness away from justice, all that is left is vengeance.

And more and more, that is the choice that is set before us. Forgiveness without accountability …or vengeance without grace. And each is soul-killing in its dehumanization for victim and perpetrator; for judge, jury and accused.

And so, we return to that core question of the cross … what would Jesus do … and in fact what is Jesus doing when he says these words? What is the justice of God? It cannot be either option. For the justice of God, the way of the cross, is not mimicking the cross in either its suppression of truth through fear …or vengeance which we anoint ourselves to execute on God’s behalf. The justice of God, the holiness of God demands both accountability *and* mercy, reparation *and* forgiveness.

And so, we return to those words: “God, forgive them.”

Like the cross, it is not for the faint of heart. It requires the cultivation of a scriptural quality that has also been misunderstood and weaponized against the oppressed … it requires meekness.

Like forgiveness, meekness has been redefined to suit the powerful. “The meek shall inherit the earth” has been used by the powerful to ensure the powerless that their passivity will be rewarded in time … so for now they should just accept their fate.

But sixth-century Syrian monk John Climacus understood the true Beatitude of meekness. Far from meekness being an emulation of a doormat, John writes:

“Meekness is an unchangeable state of mind, which remains the same in honor and dishonor. Meekness consists in praying calmly and sincerely for a troublesome neighbor.”

And finally … “Meekness is a rock overlooking the sea of irritability, which breaks all the waves that dash against it yet remains completely unmoved.

Meekness is what we must allow God to cultivate in us if we are to embrace the life of freedom that comes through forgiveness. It is not weak resignation to or emulation of the evils we deplore. It is claiming our stories and our wounds, lamenting and wailing, demanding the restorative justice that comes from reparation and amendment of life.

It is forsaking the small yet seductive power of victim for the greater and more lasting power of survivor. It is over time becoming that rock of love which breaks all the waves that dash against it yet remains completely unmoved.

The struggle is real. It has real names and faces and wounds. We seem them all around us. We see them in the mirror. The poem I opened with this afternoon was written by the 2008 combined poetry class of Thistle Farms, from women who were moving from victim to survivor. Survivor of childhood rape and sexual abuse. Survivor of prostitution, violence and drug abuse.

The language of “I come from” was the stories of their lives. Forgiveness for them was not a throwaway line … nor was it something they mumbled when demanded of them by their rapists, abusers or by the so-called justice system that ingested and spat them out over and over again. Forgiveness required them not to suppress the truth but to speak it, to cry it, even to scream it. Forgiveness for them is a journey of recognizing that part of reclaiming their own blessed humanity was refusing to dehumanize even those people and systems who had been so inhumane to them.

The struggle is real. It has real names and faces and wounds and consequences.

Boesak writes of the time, a decade ago, when South Africans were struggling with horrific events that happened in a small South African town of Modimolle, “*Mr. Johan Kotze, estranged husband of Ms. Ina Bonnette, forced three laborers at gunpoint to gang rape and brutally mutilate her. He then tied her up and forced her to listen while her son Conrad begged for his life. Then he shot the boy three times, including a fatal shot to the head.*

*“The media took to calling Kotze (Kotzah) ‘the Monster from Modimolle.’ The public wanted him condemned and destroyed. In the middle of the media frenzy and the public outrage, Desmond Tutu stepped into the breach. In a letter to the press, Tutu called upon the media to stop calling Kotze a ‘monster.’*

*‘These are dastardly deeds,’ he wrote, ‘barbaric and monstrous in extent and we are quite right to condemn them roundly, unequivocally.’ What is disturbing however, ‘is when our outrage leads us to dub the alleged perpetrator ‘the Monster from Modimolle’ as the media has been doing. He may indeed be guilty of inhuman, ghastly and monstrous deeds, but he is not a monster.;’*

*“Then Tutu returned to the argument he used at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. ‘We are actually letting him off the hook…because monsters have no moral sense of right and wrong—and therefore cannot be regarded as morally blameworthy. No, Mr. Johan Kotze (Kotzah)remains a child of God with the capacity to become a saint.’*

*“In reference to the TRC and biblical examples, the archbishop concluded, ‘But we believed then, and I hope we still do, that it was possible for people to change for the better, that the worst criminal could become a good and virtuous person.’ Perpetrators should be held accountable but not judged irredeemable.”*

“God, forgive them,” Jesus says … even as the nails are digging into his flesh.

As we watch the trial of Derek Chauvin for the brutal murder of George Floyd.

As we deal with the deep dehumanizing wounds caused by not just the extremes of evangelical fundamentalism but every corner of the church that bears Christ’s name.

As we remember all that others have done to us and all that we have done to others and to ourselves.

As we begin conversations in our own congregation about how we came to be on the land on which I stand this day and the origin and deep effects the white images in our stained glass windows have had for generations, we seek to understand the deep power of Jesus’ words from the cross.

What does it mean for us truly to take that arduous journey of forgiveness? What does it mean to choose justice and reject vengeance? What does it mean for us to refuse to be silenced, to express our pain and our rage, and yet not become the evil we deplore?

“God forgive them,” Jesus says. It is not a sound bite but a journey, a struggle. It is the work of our lives.

Again, Boesak continues:

“*Forgiveness is not simply a matter of forgetting and ‘moving on’ as if nothing has happened, or, indeed, nothing else has to be done. Forgiving is not forgetting, but holding the memory as holy before God, so that the victim is honored, and the atrocity is never repeated again. Reconciliation is holding the memory holy before God as a means of responding to God's demands for justice for the vulnerable and the powerless, the neglected, and the excluded. There is nothing sentimental about it.”*

Forgive, Jesus says.

Forgive, say the women of Thistle Farms … for “Forgive and Feel Freedom” is one of the spiritual principles upon which their community is founded.

Thistle Farms’ founder, Becca Stevens, knows that journey well. She writes:

*“I have forgiven the man who abused me when I was a child. I can pray for him and hope for wholeness for his family. That didn’t come until after crossing a desert of hurt and then fording a river of confusion, promiscuity, shame and then stepping over the bridge of confrontation and finally climbing the hill of acceptance. But I am so grateful that I know the sweet taste of forgiveness. I love that I can see that even through that hard, holy ground, there were gifts that I have been able to share my whole life. I marvel that part of who I am was born in those nightmare experiences. It makes me love the world more.”*

From the cross, Jesus says: “God, forgive them.”

*“I am from dark alleys and early days.*

*I am from my kids crawling out of my lap after I nodded out.*

*I am from the smell of alcohol on many men.*

*I am from addiction.”* say the women of Thistle Farms

Where am I from?

Where are you from?

Where are we from?

What are our wounds … the ones we have suffered and the ones we have inflicted?

What are the stories that we have kept inside far too long?

What is the justice that God craves for our lives.

From the cross, Jesus cries: “God forgive them.”

From the cross, Jesus cries:

*I am from a life of one to a life of many.*

*I am from total bleakness to pure light.*

*I am from dying to recovering.*

*I am from anger to forgiveness.*

*I am from being nothing to being everything.*

*I am from bondage to freedom.*

*Amen.*