**Luke 23:34** February 18, 2015

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Ash Wednesday

*Luke 23:34 Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”*

**DO WE NEED GOD’S FORGIVENESS?**

Dear Friends in Christ,

**I**

Jesus said, ***“Father, forgive them.”*** Why would Jesus say that? I wonder how many of you know. Just put up your hands—there is no shame if you don’t know—how many know to whom Jesus said, ***“Father, forgive them”*** and what they were doing?

Jesus’ reason is found in the verse right before this one. It says, *“When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left”* (33). The hammers ring as the nails go clean through the flesh into the posts, and Jesus says, “Father, forgive them.” Those three words are a sermon in themselves.

Those soldiers had guilt, for certain. They crucified the Son of God. Jesus’ rank and his innocence make this a terrible sin for the soldiers. They were torturing and killing the one who will some day stand before them as their divine judge. They are going to need forgiveness. And the one they crucified asks for their forgiveness. One of the most certain things about God is that *“[he] wants all men to be saved”* (1 Timothy 2:4).

Do we need God’s forgiveness as badly as they? Maybe in the past we did some things that we should not have, but we don’t need forgiveness like these soldiers did. We did not crucify Jesus. In fact, we come every week to worship Jesus, to sing songs to him. We even sometimes come to mid-week services and Bible studies. We are not the “bad” people who sell drugs to teenagers, molest children, behead fellow humans. Instead we try to be helpful, take care of our family, assist the neighbors. Who really needs God’s forgiveness worse? Those soldiers or us?

But the fact of the matter is that this cannot be an either/or question. *“All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”* (Romans 3:23). And just in case we are going to try to say, “Well, yes, I sinned but that was before I believed in Jesus,” the Bible is at pains to point out that Christians, too, must confess their sins In 1 John 1:8 a Christian writing to other Christians says, *“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”* Therefore we make a confession of our sins in almost every single worship service. I hope that many of our personal prayers to God also include confessions of our sins. It is not just Jesus crucifiers who need his forgiveness, but even Jesus lovers.

So Jesus said, ***“Father, forgive them”*** also for this here circle of friends in Christ. Yet his forgiveness is richer than when we say, “I forgive you,” to our co-worker or spouse or even enemy. That can be difficult. But when Jesus said, ***“Father, forgive them,”*** he went far beyond what we can do.

Think of it this way. (You can find numerous stories like this one from September 2012.) Two families whose children were killed by a drunk driver publicly forgave him in a Michigan courtroom. How difficult that must have been! I am awed by people who can do that. More than that, Jesus forgave our *many* sins against him. Those generous, forgiving families, however, did not send someone to prison for the 2.5 year prison sentence the drunk driver received. Sure, they pleaded for leniency, but they did not go to prison. That is what Jesus did. He said, ***“Forgive them,”*** and then Jesus suffered and died for our sins, he took the prison sentence!

Do we need that kind of forgiveness? Most certainly. We have sinned, and our sins demand punishment. How wonderful to hear Jesus say about all of us, ***“Father, forgive them.”*** I can’t say that I am happy to hear those words because they come from the lips of a man who is being nailed to a tree. But they are wonderful beyond understanding.

**II**

But the other day as I listened to Jesus say these words, I heard something in Jesus’ words that made me worry. Listen. ***“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”*** Sure those soldiers were pagan killers of the Son of God. And if they were anything like the ordinary Roman soldier, they were brutal men full of blood-lust. But they were ignorant. ***“They do not know what they are doing,”*** Jesus said.

Sometimes we divide people up between “good” and “bad” people. If that phrase—***“They do not know what they are doing”***— is the divider between the sinners and the really bad sinners, this pastor suddenly finds himself in the “really bad sinner” category. I was nursed on the Word of God. I heard those words months before I was born! I memorized the Ten Commandments, the books of the Bible, dozens of hymns, hundreds of Bible passages before I left St. Paul’s Lutheran School in eighth grade. One thing that cannot be said of the 44 years of my life is, ***“Father, forgive [him], for [he] does not know what [he] is doing.”***

Indeed, I think this is a good place for us to compare how Jesus spoke to the ignorant Roman soldiers with what he said to the Jewish leaders who knowingly rejected him. To those who heard him and still went their own way, Jesus said, *“If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.”* (John 9:41). Jesus did not pray, ***“Father, forgive them,”*** for them. Or chew on these words of the Bible, *“If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire.”* (Hebrews 10:26-27) Do we need God’s forgiveness? More than we know!

How sweet are those words of God, *“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”* (Romans 8:1) It says that *“though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow”* (Isaiah 1:18). Though our sins require punishment, and our intentional sins demand an extra measure of blood, Jesus has died for it all. All who trust in him for that forgiveness are forgiven.

One last word. May this Ash Wednesday message strike a holy fear of sin in us. I don’t want you to have a fear of punishment and suffering, for Jesus has so generously taken care of that. But may we have a holy fear of falling into sin. Let me say it again: May we be afraid of falling into sin. When tempted to speak ill of another person, stop. When someone tries to advise you against sin, listen. When tempted to be dishonest, to cheat on a test, to linger over impure thoughts, may we feel a horror over what we become when we fall into sins that we know are sins.

Ash Wednesday is a serious and sad day. On this day we consider how badly we need God’s forgiveness on a daily basis. On this day we consider how badly Jesus suffered because of what we have done and continue to do. On this day, there is a quiet wonder as Jesus also says about us, the worst of knowing sinners, ***“Father, forgive them.”*** Amen.