

Forgiving the Unforgivable

Opening song – Lead me to the Cross

Lent video Luke 22:54-62

Luke 23:32-34

The question I want us to consider this morning is ‘How do you forgive the unforgivable?’

- Years ago Gay and I were doing some pre marriage counselling with a young couple and the woman was telling us her story. It was a story of abuse and broken trust by her father and now she was expected to trust her husband-to-be. She had come a long way but knew she still had stuff to deal with. What her father did was unforgivable! Yet forgiveness would give her freedom, bring healing to her, but how do you forgive the unforgivable
- There was a young man in our young adults group, he was an interesting chap, shall we say ‘relationally challenged’. He didn’t know relational boundaries very well, he was a bit overwhelming when with people. One day after many months of spending time with him he told me his story. As a child he had been shut in a cupboard for hours each day. Unforgivable, yet forgiveness would give him freedom, but how do you forgive the unforgivable.

How do you forgive the unforgivable? Christians are not exempt from life’s challenges and life seems to be filled with unending series of heart-breaking problems. Divorce. Broken homes. Broken marriages. Broken promises. Children estranged from their parents. Parents estranged from their children. Long-time friends who don’t speak to each other anymore. People who’ve lost their jobs because someone cheated them. People who’ve lost their fortunes because someone did them wrong. Families that can’t be in the same room at Christmastime because they hate each other so much.

How do you forgive in situations like that? How do you forgive, when by definition what has happened to you is unforgivable? WE worship a God who understands something of that.

Song: How deep the fathers love

Killing Time

It's Friday morning, 9 A.M. Killing time. Outside the Damascus Gate is a road and on the other side of the road is a flat area near the spot where the prophet Jeremiah is buried. Up above is a rocky outcrop that, if studied at a certain angle, looks like a skull. You can see eroded into the limestone two sockets for the eyes, a place for the nose and maybe a place for the mouth. Skull Hill, they called it. Golgotha. It was the place where the Romans did their killing. And Friday was the day and nine o'clock was the time.

The soldiers were ready to do their dirty work. They were Roman soldiers. They were from another part of the world. They weren't from Palestine. They weren't from Israel. They weren't followers of the law. They were simply soldiers, who had a job to do. And it happened to be that they were on the death squad. They were in charge of crucifixions.

On this particular Friday morning their work load was a little bit light. Only three this week. They didn't know the names. They never did and it didn't matter. They were just the executioners. From their point of view, it didn't pay to stop and think about what they did. That was for someone else higher up the ladder. Guilt or innocence wasn't their business. They'd go crazy if they started worrying about things like that. They just had a job to do. And to do their job they needed two things. They needed toughness and they needed good technique. If they did a sloppy job, they were certain to hear about it later.

Mob Psychology

So it's 9a.m. and up the road comes a group of people. The soldiers know that two of the men being crucified are just average, ordinary criminals—the kind of lowlife scum that fills any big city anywhere in the world. That's no big deal.

But this third man, the one from up north, this preacher from Nazareth. His case is different. They don't really know who he is. They know it's important because they sense the buzz in the crowd. There are more people than usual.

There's something morbidly fascinating about watching someone else die. The people of Jerusalem, at least some of them, loved to come out and see the crucifixions. Well, maybe they didn't love it but they couldn't stay away. Some strange magnetic force drew them back to Skull Hill again and again. But this day there were more people than usual, a bigger crowd, noisier, rowdier, milling to and fro, waiting for the action to begin.

Up the road comes a parade of people led by a brawny foreigner carrying a cross. Surely that couldn't be the one they were going to crucify. It turns out he was a man by the name of Simon—Simon of Cyrene. The crowd swirls around him and behind him is a stooped figure, a man not quite six feet tall. Now walking, now crawling, each step an agony to behold. Half a man, half a creature from the worst nightmare you've ever had. He had been beaten within an inch of his life. His back was in shreds. His front was covered with the markings of the whip. His face was disfigured and swollen where they had ripped out his beard by the roots. And on his head a crown of thorns, six inches long stuck under the skin. A shell of a man. A man already more dead than alive. When the soldiers on the crucifixion detail saw that, they weren't unhappy because sometimes people got a little feisty when you tried to nail them to the cross. No, they didn't mind getting a person who was almost dead because it meant that their work would be easy.

They laid the cross out on the ground and they laid the body of Jesus on the cross. He moved, he moaned, he didn't do much. One hand over here, one hand over there. Wrapping rope around this arm and around that arm. Rope around the legs, bent and partially resting on a small platform. They drove the spike on the forearm side of the wrist so that when the weight of the cross fell, the spike wouldn't rip all the way through the hand. A spike in both wrists and then a spike through the legs. With the ropes in place they began to pull the cross up. Jesus now bleeds from the raw wounds. Steady now, boys, steady. They dropped it in the hole and it fell with a thud. And there was Jesus, naked and exposed before the world, beaten, bruised and bloody. The soldiers stood back, satisfied. A job well done.

Song; were you there <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4EQi-NVNU>

Beyond Forgiveness

What they did that day was unforgivable - crucifying the Son of God.

And yet, Jesus said, in his first word from the cross, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." This was the unforgivable sin. Yet Jesus said, "Father forgive them."

That leads me back to the original question, a question which is still relevant today, a question which is not just theological or historical, but a question that many of us are wrestling with right now: **How do you forgive the**

unforgivable? How do you forgive someone who has done something to you so terrible that it defies any attempt at human forgiveness?

As I look at this story, especially as I consider the remarkable words of Jesus, two things come to mind that will help us understand how to forgive the unforgivable.

1. It is possible to forgive the unforgivable by remembering that the people who are hurting you do not really know what they are doing.

This statement seems to be wrong. You may be thinking, “How can they not know. They knew exactly what they were doing. They knew they were going to hurt me and they went ahead and did it anyway.”

- When she lied to me she knew what she was doing.
- When he double-crossed me he knew what he was doing.
- When he walked out on me he knew what he was doing.
- When he broke the marriage vows he knew what he was doing.

She knew what she was doing. They knew exactly what they were doing. They knew they would hurt me and they did it on purpose.

Consider Jesus. Who was he talking about when he said, “For they know not what they are doing?” Who is the “they” he is talking about?

You say; “**The Roman soldiers.**” Did the Roman soldiers know what they were doing or not? Well, yes they knew they were crucifying a man. Did they know *who* he was? No, they didn’t really know who he was. If anybody really didn’t know what they were doing it was the Roman soldiers. It was just a job to them, just the next grisly item on the Friday agenda. To them, crucifixion was what their commander ordered them to do. “Next please. Next please. Hand me the nails. Crucify the guy and get him out of here.” That was just a job to them. Surely they didn’t really know what they were doing.

Who else is the “they?” “It’s **Pilate’s fault.**” Did Pilate know what he was doing? Well, what did Pilate know? Pilate knew that Jesus was called the King of the Jews but he tried to wash his hands of it. He knew enough to scare him, but he didn’t know the whole story.

What about **Caiaphas**? Caiaphas knew that Jesus was called the Son of God, the Messiah. What did Caiaphas do? He said, “Yes, he deserves death, but sent him to Pilate”

“What about **Judas**? Didn’t Judas know what he was doing? He was with Jesus for three years.” No, if anything is clear from the New Testament, Judas was totally confused about who Jesus was. He knew that Jesus was supposed to be the Messiah but when you really got down to it, Judas thought Jesus was going to roll into Jerusalem, take over the place and set himself up as King. Judas was baffled because Jesus didn’t fit his preconceptions about what the Messiah was going to do. That’s one of the reasons he betrayed him—because he was confused and disillusioned and disappointed at the end.

So are all these men innocent?” No, I’m not saying that. Judas was guilty. Pilate was guilty. Caiaphas was guilty. The Roman soldiers were guilty and so were the Jewish leaders, the Pharisees and the scribes who conspired to put him to death. And what about the mob? Yes, they were guilty. And what about the spectators who came to cheer and to mock? Yes, they were guilty.

But Jesus said, “Father forgive them because they do not know what they are doing.”

Now look at the word “what” because it is the key to the first saying of Christ from the cross. The key is not the fact that ‘they’ do not know. The key is “what”. They do not know ‘what’ they are doing.

- They know what they are doing, but they do not know what it really means.
- They know what they are doing but they don’t know who they’re really doing it to.
- They know what they are doing but they don’t know what the ramifications are.

That is to say, they are guilty of killing a man, but they are guilty of much worse than they know - they are guilty of killing the Son of God.

“They Need Forgiveness More Than They Know”

When Jesus cried out, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do” he was really saying “Father forgive them because they need forgiveness more than they know.” “Father forgive them because they are in desperate need of forgiveness and they don’t even know it.”

The same is true with the people who hurt you. They need forgiveness more than they know. It’s probably true, they knew what they were doing when they made that telephone call or when they wrote that email, when they said that

thing that tore your heart, when they left and walked out. They knew exactly what they were doing, but they didn't know the terrible nature of it. They didn't know how bad and how terrible it was. They didn't know down deep, how badly they hurt you.

The people who have hurt you, need your forgiveness more than they need anything else in the world. They need it more than they know. And they will probably never change until they get it. And some of them won't change even after they get it. But still, you have to forgive them.

That's the deeper meaning of this first word from the cross. You can forgive the unforgivable, if you remember that the people who have hurt you so deeply don't, at the deepest level, know what they have really done to you. Forgiveness is what they need and you are the only one who can give it to them.

How can we forgive the unforgivable? First, by remembering that often the people who hurt us don't really know what they're doing.

2. It is possible to forgive the unforgivable by remembering that Jesus forgave us when we were unforgivable.

This is where the words of Jesus become very personal. We're included in his prayer. When he prayed, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do", who was included in "them"? The soldiers, the mob, the women, the disciples, Pilate, Caiaphas, Judas, Peter and all the Jewish leaders. You know who else was in it? You were. I was. He was praying for you and he was praying for me.

"No. No. You don't understand. I'm not like those people. I'm different. I'm not that bad. I'm not the kind of person who could crucify anyone. I'd never do anything like that."

Oh, yes you are, and yes you would, and yes you have many times, and yes you will again. You're not as good as you think. If you had been there, chances are you would have been holding the nails. If you had been there you would have been part of the mocking crowd. If you had been there you would have been saying, "Crucify him. Crucify him. Do it again. Another nail. Let him have it." We're not that much different. We're not that much better.

Do you know what keeps us from forgiving the people who hurt us? At the root it is this: **We think we're better than they are.** We think we would never hurt

anybody the way they have hurt us. "I'm just not as bad as that. I'd never treat anybody the way they treated me." Oh, how deluded we are when we think that way. It is our pride that keeps us from the hard step of forgiving the unforgivable.

Not So Good, Not So Nice

The truth is we get mad just like they do. We lose our temper just like they do. We write angry emails just like they do. We say stupid things at Christmas time just like they do. We betray our friends just like they do. We hurt our children just like they do. We break our promises just like they do. We crucify our friends just like they do.

When you really get down to it, we're just like them. No, we are them and they are us and if we don't see that, we've missed the real point of Jesus' first cry from the cross. If we think we're so much better than the people who have hurt us so deeply, we are self-deceived. If only we could see that when we really get down to it we're all in the same boat together. We're all truly sinners in one way or another. We all fail in many ways.

An Oasis of Forgiveness

If we could see ourselves the way we really are, it would keep us from being so angry. If we would admit that we really don't know it all. If we would admit that we really don't have it all together. If we would admit we're not as good as we think we are - we'd find it easier to forgive the people who have hurt us in an unforgivable way.

The secret of forgiveness is to understand that between you and the person who hurt you there's really no difference at all.

It is possible to forgive the unforgivable but you've got to realize before you do it, that Jesus forgave you when you were unforgivable. When he prayed that prayer, he wasn't just praying for them back there, he was praying for all of us twenty centuries later.

I think it is enormously significant that the first word from the cross is a word of forgiveness. We are being told by that that Jesus came to establish a religion of forgiveness. He is at heart a man of forgiveness. He came into this world to establish a church that would be an oasis of forgiveness. And to bring to the world a race of forgiving men and women.

Communion

Song; I'm Forgiven <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=avJ4IDnZWRU>