

Father, Forgive Them



Last words can reveal so much about someone, can perfectly encapsulate

someone's life, reveal their core beliefs and identity, and maybe in some cases can come out of left-field. Last word can run the gamut from profound to irreverent, touching to angry, inspiring to humorous. George Harrison of the Beatles' last words were, "Love one another." Winston Churchill spoke his last words, "I'm so bored with it all," slipped into a coma, and died nine days later. On 9/11, Todd Beamer rallied the people of Flight 93 with, "Are you guys ready? Let's roll." James French, a convicted murderer put to death by the electric chair in Oklahoma in 1966, said to the press covering the execution: "Hey fellas! How about this for a headline for tomorrow's paper? 'French fries.'" I mentioned this a few weeks ago, but among the last things that John Wesley said was, "Best of all, God is with us." But his last word to all gathered around his bedside was, "Farewell."

Today, we are starting a message series that will take us to Easter by looking carefully and intently at the seven statements Jesus makes on the cross. All the words that Jesus spoke during his earthly ministry matter, obviously. But the cross is such a focal point of our faith, a symbol that adorns the front of our sanctuary, and well it should. So, let's explore. the Gospel writers, as they were trying to communicate not only who Jesus was and what he did but also the significance of his life, felt it important to include his dying words. What can we learn from the dying words of the son of God?



But before we dig in to our first phase, I'd like for us to talk just a

moment about the sheer miracle it is that Jesus was able to speak at all during his crucifixion. In his Daily Bible Study series, William Barclay vividly explains the process of crucifixion and its effect on the body: "The terror of crucifixion was this:

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the pain of the process was terrible but it was not enough to kill, and the victim was left to die of hunger and thirst beneath the blazing noontide sun and the frosts of night.

Many a criminal was known to have hung for a week upon his cross until he died raving mad.” And with his position on the cross, putting pressure on the diaphragm, means that Jesus, every time, every excruciating time, would have had to push up on the nails in his hands to relieve enough of the pressure to croak out a few words. Seven times after being beaten, mocked, spat upon, and crucified, Jesus mustered the strength to speak.



Jesus' first statement from the cross is, "Father, forgive them, for they do

not know what they're doing." Given all that we know about Jesus' life and ministry and human nature, it should really come as no surprise that Jesus' first words from the cross are words of prayer. How often in the gospels did Jesus break away to engage in prayer, to connect his heart to the Fathers? It was just last week that we saw Jesus do exactly that on the Mount of Transfiguration. What is surprising and even a little jarring is that Jesus is praying for the forgiveness of someone and some groups of someones.



I'm intrigued by Jesus' use of the word "them." Anytime someone uses a

word like that, it begs the question: who is "them." A professor of mine in seminary was describing a panel discussion where someone was over-using the word "we." "We need to do this; we need to do that." Finally, someone on the panel looked at the speaker and said, "Excuse me, but who the heck are *we*?" So, who is Jesus referring to when he says, "Father, forgive *them*?" And the answer to that question has many layers and the "them" in this case has a lot of different meanings. Jesus is speaking on

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behalf of the soldiers who mocked him, beat him, tore his clothes and were preparing to gamble for his clothes at the foot of the cross. For them, he prayed, “Father, please forgive them.”

Jesus was praying for the crowd that came to look and jeer and laugh. The crowd that on Palm Sunday was waiving their palm branches and shouting “Hosanna, God save us” to Jesus and his procession. The crowd that only days later would choose Barrabas to be released and Jesus to be crucified. For them, he prayed, “Father, please forgive them.”

Jesus was praying for the religious leaders who allowed their jealousy and spiritual blindness to lead them to conspiring with the Romans, the enemy, in order to bring down Jesus, the Messiah. For them, he prayed, “Father, please forgive them.”

Jesus was even praying for you and for me as he prayed on the cross. The old gospel hymn asks us, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” And the answer in a spiritual sense is yes. The death of Jesus was an event that transcended time, and his prayer had this same power. Jesus was praying for you and me. In this moment, Jesus the great high priest was pleading for the atonement, the setting right, of all humankind. Jesus’ sacrificial action was for all who had come before and all who would come after and for all who heard his word that day. You and I were there when they crucified the Lord. In a sense, Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them. Forgive (insert your name). Forgive those in our churches and those on the streets. Forgive those in the suburbs and those downtown. Forgive those in our country and those on the other side of the world. Father, forgive them.” This idea that Jesus was praying from the cross for our

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forgiveness, and that he was, even before we repented, dying for us, is a mind-bending idea.



Because we are forgiven, dear friends, there is an implicit challenge in

the words of Jesus today. A challenge to you and to me and to all who call on God's name. Because we have been forgiven from our sins and shortcomings, we are called to be agents of forgiveness in the world around us. Jesus could have prayed this prayer in silence, but he chose to pray it aloud. He wanted us to 'overhear' this prayer. He not only wanted us to know we're forgiven; he wanted to teach us what it means to be his follower. Those of us who choose to follow Jesus must practice forgiveness, just as he did.

Paul Tillich, a Lutheran pastor and theologian, writing in a sermon entitled "To Whom Much Is Forgiven . . ." notes, "Forgiveness is an answer, the divine answer, to the question implied in our existence." On the cross Jesus' first words demonstrate God's willingness to forgive our sins, and they call us to become people who follow in his path—people who can pray, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."