

“Auschwitz Revisited”

Luke 23:32-34

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor
Smoke Rise Baptist Church
Stone Mountain, Georgia
February 6, 2005

Why are stories about forgiveness so powerful? Perhaps it is because the need to be forgiven or forgive others is universal. Is there anyone here that has not hurt others or been a victim? Of course not.

On many occasions, I have scanned newspaper or magazine articles with little concentration until I started reading a story about forgiveness. At that point, words would carefully be read and details remembered. Often the article would be clipped and filed for future use.

I found this to be the case yesterday reading the article about hockey star, Dany Heatley. You recall that he crashed his Ferrari convertible in Buckhead after driving at a high rate of speed, killing his teammate and best friend, Dan Snyder. He was given a lighter sentence than most thought he would receive for first-degree vehicular homicide because Snyder's parents pleaded with the judge for leniency. I was touched deeply by their words of support for Heatley.

This morning, our text contains this kind of story. Jesus' long and agonizing walk to Calvary finally ended and he was nailed to a cross. Suspended between heaven and earth, he spoke. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Would those have been my first words? Hardly. Would they have left my lips at any time during that ordeal? I doubt it.

So why did Jesus say them? He was a man of integrity. What had he taught his disciples? "Love your enemies, do good to those that hate you, bless those that curse you, pray for those that mistreat you" Luke 6:27. It was time to practice what he preached and he did. As a matter of fact, it was the first thing he did. I don't think he wanted to take the chance of dying before these words were uttered.

What impact did this prayer have upon those around him? I cannot speak for everyone, but I know that many were positively influenced by it. Surely the request for mercy by the criminal on a cross next to Jesus was the result of hearing these gracious words. No doubt the soldier's declaration that Jesus was truly the Son of God was due to what he heard and witnessed that day. Perhaps this prayer even gave Peter hope as he was reeling from his cowardly denials.

Never underestimate the power of gracious words, especially under adversity. They can change people's lives.

What impact can these words have upon you and me? They can change us, too. How? **They can challenge us to look at the consequences of our actions before we make decisions.**

"Father, forgive them, *for they do not know what they are doing.*" How could they not know what they were doing? It is so obvious to us. Why were they ignorant? What blinded them? The same things that dull our senses dulled theirs, greed, jealousy, fear, ignorance, hatred, the lust for power. These vices not only brought the worst out in them but also made them unaware of the glaring and subtle consequences or unwilling to admit them.

I am even willing to give some of those abusing Jesus the benefit of the doubt. They were merely following orders and being loyal to corrupt leaders. They were convinced they were being good patriots by getting rid of this troublemaker. Surely, deep down in their hearts they questioned the wisdom of their actions. I hope so, but that may be wishful thinking.

Last week, I followed the events that surrounded the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of the prisoners of war at Auschwitz. It was the largest and most lethal of the Nazi death camps. More than one million people lost their lives at this Polish camp during WWII.

One of the survivors, Elie Wiesel, represented President Bush at the ceremonies. Seeing his name and picture reminded me of one of the most gripping books I have ever read. It was

written by Wiesel and is titled simply, Night. You cannot read it and be unchanged. The account of his experiences at that death camp will haunt you.

I grieved when I read how Wiesel described his captors and tormentors. For the most part they were common people with families of their own that went about their task of slaughtering innocent families without passion or haste. It was their job and they were convinced it was necessary. The same could probably be said of Jesus' captors.

Don't let it be said of you, though. Don't let evil bring the worst out in you and keep you from seeing the consequences of your actions. Don't let others convince you to do what you know in your heart is wrong. "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" should challenge all of us to find out what we are doing and where it is leading.

Jesus' first words on the cross can inspire us to be sensitive to others' needs even when our own are pressing down upon us.

Yesterday was a sad day at Smoke Rise. Hundreds of members gathered in this sanctuary with Wes Smith's family to celebrate his life. Wes died Wednesday morning after a year long struggle with leukemia. He was a delightful twenty-two year old college student.

His brother, Sean, spoke at the service and shared a story that touched all of us. Two weeks ago, Wes' pain suddenly became unbearable. The paramedics were called to come to his home to transport him to the hospital. Sean sat by Wes' side and held his hand until they arrived. While waiting, Sean looked at Wes and said, "Tell me what I can do to help you-anything-and I will do it."

Sean said that he expected Wes to reply, "Please, do something to take this pain away. I cannot bear it another moment. Give me more medicine or take me to the hospital in your car." Instead, Wes took advantage of the opportunity to express his own feelings of gratitude and love for his brother. In barely audible words, Wes said, "I love you so much."

When Jesus was crucified, he was not thinking solely about himself either, but the people around him. He was not concerned about his need for relief as much as their need for forgiveness. So, his first words composed a prayer for mercy on their behalf.

This is certainly not the world's way of dealing with pain or problems. Few people can or would be this sensitive to the needs of others in their own hour of need.

Elie Wiesel recalled a conversation he had with a guard at Auschwitz. Wiesel's father was near the point of death and fifteen-year-old Elie was trying to help him.

A guard put his hand on Elie's shoulder and said, "Listen to me, boy. Don't forget that you are in a concentration camp. Here, every man has to fight for himself and not think of anyone else, even of his father. Here, there are no fathers, no brothers, no friends. Everyone lives and dies for himself alone. I'll give you a sound piece of advice. Don't give your ration of bread or soup to your old father. There's nothing you can do for him and you are killing yourself. Instead, you ought to be having his ration."

"Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." These don't sound like the words of someone that had grown cynical and callous. It was obvious that Jesus' compassion would not die before he would. Neither should ours. Don't let pain or evil bring the worst out in you and turn you into a selfish and insensitive person. Live and die with a heart full of compassion.

Jesus' words of mercy on the cross can motivate us to love even our enemies. You don't have to hate those that hurt you. Jesus didn't.

In this prayer, Jesus taught his disciples that it was possible to love people at their worst. It would not be easy, but for the sake of a peaceful society, it could be and must be done.

The Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr., who lost a son and wife to assassins' bullets said, "I am not bitter. I carry no ill will in my heart toward any man. I refuse to stoop low enough to hate anybody."

After his wife was slain as she played the Lord's Prayer on the organ in the church where he was pastor, King said, "You know it hurts. When you live with a woman forty-eight years, a

partner, to have her taken away in a minute like that. You know it hurts. But I'm just not going to hate. You want to debate that? You do that. I ain't got time. I'm going on with my job, being every man's brother."

And so must we. Jesus knew that hatred breeds hatred and violence breeds violence. Somewhere, sometime it had to stop and Calvary was the place to begin.

"Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." This needs to be our response to those that have hurt us, too. Don't let evil bring the worst out in you and drive you to seek revenge.

Will the first words Jesus uttered on the cross change you like they did many that heard them that day? I hope so and would be willing to say the people around you do, too. Why not make some changes in your life that will give you a story that others will carefully read and share with their friends?