

“Learning Forgiveness”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade
The Third Sunday in Lent
March 14, 2010
Scripture: Luke 23:32-43

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *Great God, you are rich in mercy and forgiveness beyond our knowing. Show us what we need to understand, and help us to learn how to practice forgiveness in all our relationships, so that we might experience the renewal of the life your offer us in Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.*

The Brothers Karamazov is a novel written by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, a Russian author, at the close of the nineteenth century (1880). It is a story about a father and his sons as they struggled to be a family. One of the characters in the book is a priest by the name of Father Zossima. On an occasion, a peasant woman comes to Father Zossima greatly burdened. On her knees, bowed before the priest, she pours out her heart. "I have sinned, Father," she says. "I am afraid of my sin."

Leaning close to the priest, she tells the rest of her story. She relates the nature of her sin. She was now a widow of three years. She had been married to an older man, who had been very cruel to her. In her confession to Father Zossima, she laments, "He lay ill. I thought looking at him, if he were to get well ... If he were to get up again, what then? And then the thought came to me" At this point, she whispers her sin to Father Zossima. The reader is left to conclude the exact nature of her sin. Yet, the one thing that is for sure in the story is that she has sinned, and she is afraid of her sin. She is seeking an answer to her sin. Can God forgive her of her sin?

Not long ago, there was a man awaiting execution for murdering three women. Before dying in Florida's electric chair, he confessed to twenty other murders. Ted Bundy raised a similar question with a minister who was visiting with him. Bundy questioned, "Does God forgive even big sins?" Although Mr. Bundy is dead, his

question remains an issue for many of us. Does God really forgive our worst ever sins?

The question of God's forgiveness has echoed and reechoed down through the corridors of history. And each time it is raised, our attention is drawn back to a noon hour on a Friday. The site was just a short distance outside the walls of Jerusalem. The Scriptures call the place Golgotha, "the place of the skull." It had become known as "Skull Hill" because it had once been used as a place for beheading.

The Romans had adopted the practice of crucifixion from the Persians. Rome used it for the execution of non-Roman criminals, especially murderers and robbers. The victim carried his own T-bar to the place of crucifixion. The executioners tied the victim's wrists to the T-bar to minimize movement when the nails were driven into the wrist bone - not in the palms of the hands. Nails in the palms of the hands would not support the weight of the body.

A crucifixion was not a pleasant sight to see. Despite the pain and shock to the bodily systems caused by the nails, the victim rarely died from the wounds in and of themselves. The real problem for the crucified was breathing. Increased fatigue, due to the pain involved in pulling oneself up to fill the lungs with fresh air, rapidly caused difficulty in breathing which meant that the victim died of gradual asphyxiation.

It was Friday noon. The details are repulsive. The sound of the blows of a hammer striking spikes ripping into the warm flesh rang in the ears. All creation seemed to shout in protest. The horizons darkened. The thunder crashed above the heads of those three figures hanging on crosses. The lightning tore open the skies, and the rain flooded like tears from heaven.

But, in the midst of this, we are drawn to the one on the middle cross. Almost stifled by the insanities of the moment, Jesus uttered one brief sentence: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). This is the first word from the cross. It is prayer, a prayer for forgiveness. Isn't this a strange time for prayer

in the midst of such insanity? Should he not have had words of hostility?

Who does he want forgiven? Is it the soldiers who punched and pushed him around with that silly crown of thorns? Is it the religious leaders who ridiculed him and rejected him? "If you are the messiah," they shouted in anger, "come down from the cross and we will believe!" Is it the crowd who laughed and pointed fingers, or is it the robber who in pain cursed him? Who does Jesus want forgiven? What is it that Jesus is asking his Father to do?

What is this forgiveness, anyway? Most basically, this forgiveness is something that only God can do. It is an act whereby God takes away the barriers which separate us from God's presence. Sin is always that which separates us from God. Sin cuts us off from the source of our spirituality - God! Forgiveness opens the door to a new fellowship with God - a new relationship. When God forgives, God takes us back into his fellowship and walks with us daily as if we had never sinned. Our sin is removed, covered, wiped away, and sent away. Isaiah, the prophet, says of God, "... You have cast all my sins behind your back". Again, another prophet, Micah, says of God's forgiveness, "You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea". God simply forgets our ugly past. God never remembers it again. It is no more! Now, there is nothing separating us from God. God has taken away the barrier.

George Romney, an English painter, achieved widespread recognition for his paintings, but he could not handle success. He left home, deserting his wife and children. For 38 years, he remained in London, having no contact with his wife and family. Finally, a debilitating illness robbed him of his power to paint. Suddenly, remembering his wife, he went back to her. She took him in without complaint and cared for him tenderly until he died. Romney's biographer says, "That act of forgiveness was more significant than any canvas George Romney ever painted."

Can you imagine that? After 38 years of absence, she received him back home without a question. She did not ask where he had been or

what he had been doing. She said nothing about the hardships his leaving left her to bear alone. No, she simply, with open arms, welcomed him back home. The Bible says this is the meaning of God's forgiveness. God forgives us just like that. God's forgiveness is unconditional. There are no questions asked. God does not ask us why. This world says to us, "You made your bed and must lie in it." But, our God says to us, "Take up your bed and walk. Your sins are forgiven."

In painful and difficult speech, Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (23:34). "They do not know what they are doing"? What does Jesus mean? Surely, those who encouraged his death knew what they were doing. They were not ignorant. They all followed along to watch and make sure the job was properly done. They knew what they wanted. They wanted Jesus out of their lives. They wanted his disturbing presence out of their lives. They wanted Jesus dead.

What is Jesus saying in these words? Is he trying to find an excuse for their sin? In what sense were they ignorant? They were ignorant in that though they knew full well what they were doing was wrong - they did not and could not fully understand the consequences of their actions. Jesus was the Messiah come from God, and they had rejected him. They laughed at him, and they killed him. They turned away from the one person who could give them the answer to their struggle with God. They simply ignored him. They refused to believe his words or believe who he was. That is ignorance to the fullest. Denial, rejection, and death is the way we, too, live in ignorance.

We, too, practice the same kind of ignorance. What is it but ignorance when we grow cold in our loyalty to Jesus? We have all kinds of excuses why we can not be a burning fire for Jesus. Is it not ignorance that causes us to burn with bitter feelings toward another person in the church because of her words? Is it not ignorance when we grow indifferent to the things God calls us to do and to be? Is it not ignorance when we accept all the gifts God gives us and we never

give back to God our gratitude? Is it not ignorance on our part when we attempt to live life on our own terms? Again and again, we have crashed and burned - but we have not learned yet how we are to live life with God. And that can only be pure ignorance!

In these first words from the cross, Jesus seeks for all of us - even those of us who would crucify him - the opportunity to be brought back into fellowship with God. In these words, he lets us know that he has already forgiven us and that God, his Father, is willing to forgive us, too. He would have us receive God's gift of forgiveness. His Father is a God of love - and forgiveness!

After hearing the peasant woman's confession, Father Zossima, the priest in *The Brothers Karamazov*, says, "[We] cannot commit a sin so great as to exhaust the infinite love of God. Can there be a sin which could exceed the love of God? ... Believe that God loves you as you cannot conceive; that He loves you with your sin, in your sin."

Can't you just hear him as he stretched out his arms on that cross as he prayed for us, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" And to us he said, "I love you this much."

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This and other sermons during this Lenten Season are based upon a Lenten Study written by Marjorie Thompson, author, pastor and retreat leader in the ministry of spiritual formation, which was printed in "The Thoughtful Christian" to which First Church subscribes. Thanks are also given this morning to Burton F. Blair for his sermon, "Amid His Pain He Said ..."

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Scripture: Isaiah 55:1-9
Matthew 5:43-48 and 7:1-6



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