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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY
Ash Wednesday
February 17, 2010
Text: Luke 23:34 – the Pardoning Word¹

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The first of seven words from Jesus on the cross is a pardoning word in the form of a prayer. It's recorded in Luke 23:34, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." What wondrous love is this that pardons the persecutor, that forgives the injurer even as the injury is being inflicted, that makes peace with the enemy while the battle rages on? Such a pardoning word the world does not know and cannot speak. Only Jesus, the Suffering Son can pray such a prayer and speak such a word for He came to give His life as a ransom for the many.

Even as the hammer blows drive the nails through His flesh into the wood, Jesus is heaven-bent on forgiveness. Forgiveness is so important that Jesus taught His disciples to pray in the Lord's Prayer as though forgiveness depended on them: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Matthew 6:12). He even underscored this petition, lest the meaning be lost: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14–15).

When Peter sought to limit his forgiveness to a generous seven times, Jesus raised him seventyfold: "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:22). Jesus told a parable of a servant who had been forgiven much but forgave little to his fellow servant, only to have his own unforgiveness come back to him. "So also My heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:35).

Forgiveness is never merely an option for the Christian disciple. Yet our corrupted humanity really wants nothing whatsoever to do with forgiveness. We are quick to condemn, slow to forgive, long on holding grudges. We seek our "pound of flesh," wanting to get even and settle the score. Our reflexes are not geared to letting go, which is what "forgiveness" means at its core: Letting the thing go. Leaving it be. Pulling the plug on your anger and your desire to get even.

Forgiveness renders sin powerless.

¹ Adapted from the sermon Series "Words of Life from the Cross" published by Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri, 2010.

We don't naturally let go of the sins people commit against us for there's power to control there. We store our grievances up for another day when they might become useful, especially when energized by an accusing "always" and "never." You *always* do this; you *never* do that. We learn to keep grudges even after the original offense has been long forgotten.

Unforgiveness hardens the heart. That is what makes it so spiritually toxic and debilitating. The heart that is softened and opened to God's forgiveness becomes calloused and calcified in unforgiveness. That is why Jesus is so hard-pressed to make forgiveness a key petition in the disciples' life of prayer. "Forgive us as we forgive."

Keep the channels of forgiveness open, both vertically and horizontally. The forgiveness you speak is the forgiveness you have heard spoken to you from God. It doesn't start with you, but with God. We are conduits directing that forgiveness to others where they have sinned against us. But the forgiveness comes from God, for only God can set a heart free to forgive.

Remarkably, Jesus said all sins and every blasphemy uttered against Him will be forgiven. What sort of man is this who is so bent to forgive? He is the Son of Man, humanity restored to the image of God, reflecting God's perfect forgiving love to the world in our human flesh. He is the perfect Forgiver, the divine Son who came to forgive men their sins, even the sins committed against Him.

As they nailed Jesus to the wood of His cross and stood it upright in the ground, with a convicted criminal on either side, He speaks that first word of life, a pardoning word of forgiveness. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Even as they gamble for His garments, even as those passing by mock Him and offer Him sour wine to drink, He forgives them. Every sin, every blasphemy against Him, He forgives. Your sins against Him – no matter our insurmountable they may appear – He forgives.

His prayer to the Father is for you as well. Hear it as your own. Jesus pleads for you before the throne of grace, showing the wounds of His own crucifixion. "Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing." To be honest, we don't know what we're doing. So often, we have no idea of the damage we do to others and to ourselves. We have only a small inkling of our own sinfulness, and even that we manage to rationalize away. But this pardoning word comes back to us against the background of cruel hammer blows, mockery, and scorn: "Father, forgive them."

These words are a sweet, divine melody played against the hateful noise of this world. A new song sung against the devil's lie and the old, worn out song of our sin. You hear God's divine melody, too, in the Absolution spoken at the start of our worship services, including tonight's, or in the personal absolution spoken by your pastor. Father, forgive him; forgive her. Jesus insists on it. He demands it. He petitions the Father for it, and the

Father always gives the Son what He asks for. The world is forgiven because Jesus prays for it to be forgiven, and He prays for it through the blood of His sacrifice.

He looks at our inhumanity to our fellow man—our killing fields, our genocides, our needless, brutal wars, the atrocities in our streets, the slaughter of our innocents in abortion, the ways we hurt and harm our neighbor—and He prays, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.”

This pardoning prayer reconciles; it makes whole again; it makes sworn enemies into friends. What Adam did, Jesus, God’s Son, has undone. God and man are reconciled, at peace in Jesus. In His body He carries the sin; from His mouth He speaks the pardoning word that delivers forgiveness. This is the pardoning word of the Church that enlivens and invigorates her gospel ministry. “The sins you forgive are forgiven; the sins you retain are retained” (cf. John 20:23).

You have been baptized into this pardoning Word that washes away your sin and cleanses you from all unrighteousness. Forgiveness freely given by God and freely received through faith, is also freely distributed in love. The same forgiveness that flows from the heart of Jesus flows through your forgiven heart set free to forgive those who sin against you. And now you can say those beautiful words of our Lord, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.”

This first, pardoning Word sets the stage for all of Jesus’ other words. It unbars the door, unlocks the prison. You are free precisely because you are forgiven by the pardoning Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ. We pray:

For Your pardoning Word, forgiving those who tortured You, forgiving us who have sinned against You, forgiving a world that knew You not but wished You dead, we give You thanks and praise, most holy Jesus. Amen.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.