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Sermon: March 13, 2011  
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“FATHER, FORGIVE THEM”**  
**Luke 23:32-34**

□ Luke 23:33-34a: **“When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals – one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’”**

There is the Messiah, hanging naked on a cross. His wrists and ankles were impaled just a few minutes ago, and the wounds are still bleeding.

👤 Roman soldiers have established a perimeter a few yards from Jesus, near enough for him to hear what they are saying. Their commanding officer and his aide station themselves closer in, at the foot of the cross.

These are the men who {Mk 15:15, 17-21} scourged Jesus till his back resembled raw hamburger, and then crowned him with thorns. These are the ones who **“struck him on the head with a staff and [spat] on him”** before leading him to Golgatha, where they have crucified him.

Not that there is anything personal about it.

These soldiers are Roman citizens. Their hope for significance and success rests in Rome. When Mother Rome is secure, they and their families are secure. When Mother Rome prospers, they and their families prosper.

Frankly, they do not care whether this prisoner is innocent or guilty. Stability is good for Mother Rome: if his execution can help to maintain law and order it is the expedient (that is to say, the “right”) thing to do.

Besides, they have sworn an oath to serve the empire with immediate, unquestioning obedience. If their commanding officer orders them to murder a child, they will do it. If he orders them to wipe out a whole village, they will do it. If he orders them to kill every tenth man in their formation (the official Roman term for that procedure is *deci-mation*), they will do it. Soldiers follow orders.

The Lord looks down and sees them. When he prays, **“Father, forgive them,”** he is praying for *them*.

✝ But not only for these soldiers! **“Adam’s one sin brings condemnation for everyone, but Christ’s one act of righteousness brings a new relationship with God and new life for everyone”** (Romans 5:18 {NLT}). The Son is praying for all people in every time and place who idolize security and prosperity (as do these soldiers), or sustain unjust political, economic and social systems (as do these soldiers), or blindly obey unethical orders (as do these soldiers).

👤 Back to Golgatha. Some chief priests and teachers of the law stand just outside the Roman perimeter, relieved to see Jesus dying. They sneer at him, saying, {Lk 23:35} **“He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.”**

They have long opposed him. When Jesus told a man, {Lk 5:20-21} **“your sins are forgiven,”** they accused him of blasphemy (irreverence so terrible it deserves death). {Mt 9:32-34} When Jesus drove out a demon, they accused him of working with the devil. When Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath, they {Mt 12:14} **“plotted how they might kill [him].”**

Keep in mind that these teachers of the law sincerely believe that Almighty God has appointed them the spiritual guardians of Israel – and, in their eyes, Jesus is a blaspheming, demon-possessed law-breaker.

Not only so, they are convinced that God will only send the Messiah *when* and *if* Israel achieves a high enough degree of religious and moral purity. Peace, prosperity, strength, wholeness, glory, and all the other promised blessings of the Messianic age depend on a strict adherence to the law by the whole people of God.

They are not about to let some illegitimate carpenter’s son and his gang of {Mt 9:12} **“tax collectors and sinners”** prevent the Messiah from coming!

The Lord looks down and sees them. When he prays, **“Father, forgive them,”** he is praying for *them*.

✝ But not only for these religious leaders! The Son is praying for all people in every time and place who distort the Truth that God has revealed (as do these leaders), or do evil in God’s Name (as do these leaders), or work in other ways to undermine the Kingdom (as do these leaders) – even unwittingly.

👤 A huge crowd is there, jockeying for the best views. Many {Lk 23:35} **“people [stand] [silently] watching”**; but quite a few {Mt 27:39-40} **“hurl insults at [Jesus], shaking their heads and saying, ‘You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!’”**

Some of these know Jesus first-hand. They heard his wisdom, witnessed his power to heal and cast out demons, and ate the bread and fish. They were this close

to going all in – but when Jesus started saying things, like: {Jn 6:53, 66} **“unless you eat [my] flesh and drink [my] blood, you have no life,”** they **“turned back and no longer followed him.”**

Others stuck with him through these difficult sayings, and were there last Sunday, shouting {Mt 21:9} **“Hosanna to the Son of David!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”** – but he let the momentum fizzle and failed to seize the throne. {Mt 22:15-21} Then on Tuesday he ground their fondest hopes into dust when he announced that they should pay taxes to Rome. From where they stand he is either a fool, or a fraud who manipulated them.

Others live in Egypt, Asia Minor, Italy, North Africa or Spain and are in Jerusalem for the Passover. They have never seen Jesus (probably never heard of him before today). But the mob mentality is contagious, and they are all caught up in the rage and fear.

The Lord looks down and sees them. When he prays, **“Father, forgive them,”** he is praying for *them*.

✝ But not only for this crowd! The Son is praying for all people in every time and place who regard relationship with God as a commercial transaction (as does this crowd, which thinks: “If I do the right things, God owes me health, wealth and happiness”), or who approach God as a tribal deity (as does this crowd, which thinks that God battles for their nation and against its enemies), or who act under the compulsion of their impulses of lust, jealousy, fear, rage, or what have you (as does this crowd).

 Jesus' acquaintances are here, too. A handful of them are standing near the cross: {Jn 19:25-27} Mary, Jesus' mother; her sister; Mary the wife of Clopas; Mary Magdalene and John the apostle. But the others are too afraid to come to the front, so {Lk 12:49} they hang back at the outer fringes of the crowd.

Just last night, after the Messiah prophesied his death, the apostles said {Lk 22:38} **“Look, Lord, here are two swords.”** These guys thought they were prepared for anything! Yet, at his arrest in Gethsemane, {Mt 26:56} **“all the disciples deserted him and fled.”**

Last night Simon Peter boasted {Mt 26:33} **“Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.”** He confidently declared: {Lk 22:33} **“I am ready to go with you to prison and to death”** – then, within a few hours, he denied knowing Jesus, vehemently, with oaths, three times in succession.

They are without excuse. The Master has warned them on several occasions, {Mt 20:18-19} **“the chief priests and the teachers of the law... [will] condemn [me] to death and...hand [me] over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified.”** It took a while to sink in, but they got it: when {Lk 9:51} **“Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem,”** Thomas spoke for all the apostles, saying: {Jn 11:16} **“Let us also go, that we may die with him.”**

Now here they are, miserable and defeated.

The Lord looks down and sees them. When he prays, **“Father, forgive them,”** he is praying for them.

✝ But not only for these disciples! The Son is praying for all people in every time and place who profess faith in

him but fear humankind more than God (as are the Twelve), or in some way deny or betray Jesus (as are the Twelve), or fail to heed the Word and are spiritually defeated (as are the Twelve).

What is the Good News in Luke 23:32-34?

What is God saying to us through his Word this morning?

1<sup>st</sup>, the LORD God is saying, **“Rejoice! Fear Not!”**

When Christ Jesus prayed, **“Father, forgive them,”** he meant everyone whose sin made his sacrifice necessary – including us! And if {Jas 5:16} **“the prayer of a righteous”** but fallen **“person is powerful and effective,”** how much more **“powerful and effective”** are the prayers of the perfectly righteous, sinless, holy Son?! Because of this petition God's forgiveness is available to everyone, without exception, no ifs, ands or buts. What is more, it is not going too far to say that all humanity's sins are already forgiven.

2<sup>nd</sup>, the LORD God is saying, “Pay heed, and live into my forgiveness!”

When Christ Jesus prayed **“Father, forgive them,”** God forgave the sins of the soldiers, the chief priests of the law, the people in the crowd, and the disciples. Yet unless they confessed their need for forgiveness, trusted the Lord to forgive them, and produced fruit in keeping with repentance, they did not enjoy the blessings of divine mercy. I am afraid that many of them never did. Their {Ro 8:7} **“sinful [minds]”**

remained “**hostile to God**”; they continued to be unable to {Mt 22:37, 39} “**Love ... God with all [their] heart ... soul and ... mind**” and equally unable to “**Love [their] neighbor as [themselves]**”; and they were still subject to {Ro 6:23} “**wages of sin**” (that “**is death**”), because they did not live into the forgiveness God had given them.

It is the same today: God has presented the gift of forgiveness to us, our loved ones, our neighbors, and everyone else – but until we live into it, it is like an unopened gift – it is ours in name, for God has presented it to us, but it is not ours in fact, for we have not actually opened it.

The Lord Jesus prayed “**Father, forgive them.**”  
Let us live into God’s gift of mercy and salvation. Let us be the forgiven!