



This morning's message begins a new series focusing on what is often called "the last seven words of Jesus". They're not literally seven words, but they are the last seven statements Jesus made in his life, as he hung from the cross. And so as you can see on the screen and in the bulletin, the series is titled, "CrossWords." I pray that as we look at each of these statements, God will speak from the cross of Christ into our lives and reveal himself to us, encourage us, and remind you and me that: **He is with us, even in the valley of the shadow of death – something he experienced quite acutely almost 2,000 years ago.** And if the life of Jesus ended with his death on the cross, it would be terribly remorseful and would be seen as one of the great tragedies in the history of humankind. Even with the good news of the final chapter that was written after it, it's still one of the great tragedies of humankind. Fortunately, it's not the end, and because of the empty tomb on resurrection day, we have hope and can see the good that comes out of the tragedy of the cross of Christ. But I pray that through these words from the cross we will experience hope, forgiveness, grace, love, and more, as we look at the seven last words of Jesus Christ.

So this series will take us right through Palm Sunday and even a few days past that to our special Maundy Thursday service. And in today's passage: **The first of these last seven "words" remind us that it is through the cross of Jesus Christ that we experience forgiveness.** We see here that we need forgiveness, that Jesus extends it, even when we don't recognize, admit, or know that we need forgiving. Jesus said, "Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."ⁱ

I want to start with the latter half of Jesus' statement, about these people not knowing what they're doing. Have you ever done something, and in retrospect, or maybe even in the midst of it, realized that you didn't really know what you were doing? And by saying "not knowing what they're doing" Jesus doesn't mean, and I don't mean, that we're doing something that we're clueless about how to do it - like me trying to dance a ballet or speak Japanese or dunk a basketball. ☺ I don't know how to do those things.

I'm not coordinated enough, not smart enough, and not tall enough. That's not what Jesus means. **Jesus means this more in the sense of "we don't realize the full impact or consequences" of what we are doing or saying.** Have you ever been in that kind of situation?

These guys who drove the nails into Jesus' hands and feet didn't realize the full effect of what they were doing. The crowd who gathered to watch and mock him didn't understand the full effect of this particular crucifixion. They people who divided up his clothes and took them didn't fully realize whose clothes they were getting. Yes, they all knew they were crucifying someone, the knew the mechanics of it and how to do it and what would be the result; they'd probably driven in nails or watched it done many times before, since the Romans were experts at crucifixion and knew how to do it effectively because of the number of crucifixions they carried out. But unbeknownst to them, this crucifixion was different. **They were participating in something that was much bigger, much more significant than what they realized at that moment.** Have you ever been in that kind of a situation, where the magnitude of what you were doing was bigger than you realized at the moment?

For instance, look at Simon of Cyrene, the man who was pulled out of the crowd to carry Jesus' cross. What do you think was going through his mind? Who knows if he even knew who Jesus was? Maybe he'd heard of Jesus, but didn't know if the things he heard about him were true or not? The name of Jesus was pretty well-known...he certainly had some notoriety/fame...but that doesn't mean people commonly knew what he looked like. There was no internet, no photography, no social media, no news outlets. Maybe Simon of Cyrene got home after carrying the cross of Jesus and said, "Honey, you'll never guess what happened to me today. I was walking through town on my way to the market and had my day ruined when I had to carry the cross of some criminal who was on his way out to be crucified. Out of all the people, they picked on me. How humiliating! What a joke!"

Now, maybe Simon knew Jesus and came home and said, "Honey, guess what happened to me today? I had the honor of carrying the cross of that man Jesus who was wrongly put to death. Can you believe it? It was the hardest

thing to do, but it was such a blessing to walk with him and bless him.” Who knows what Simon was thinking that day? The fact that he’s mentioned by name tells us that he *probably* was either already a follower of Jesus or became one later, because clearly he’s known in early Christian circles to have his name recorded here (otherwise, he’d probably remain anonymous, like the criminals on either side of Jesus). But if he didn’t know Jesus at the time he carried the cross, we can only imagine that Jesus’ words, “forgive them *for they don’t know what they’re doing*” include him as well. It is highly possible that he himself really had no idea what he was participating in at that moment.

And I wonder: **Do we fully realize the impact of what we’re doing?** These can be both positive and negative impacts. Over the last two days there has been a conference for foster and adoptive parents, held at Overlake Christian Church. There were over 1600 people at it, from all over North America. As adoptive parents ourselves, Gwen and I had the honor of teaching a break-out session related to parenting kids and building them up to have confidence and courage. We met people who had 12 passenger vans in order to fit all the kids in their home into one car. I met a guy who told me that he and his wife had had over 30 foster in their home – and he was a young guy, at least 10 years younger than me, so like 14 years old. ☺ That is hard, slogging work. Then after the conference there were about 100 of us who lined the hallway that leads out of the church to cheer on these people, to give them one final encouragement to hang in there, to stay strong, to keep doing the good work that God is doing through them to bless these kids. Here’s a bit of what it looked like: **Video Here (If you’re reading this, it can be viewed at the church website.)** Just lining the hallways, cheering them on, ringing cow-bells, shaking pom-poms....brings about a response that is deeply moving. There’s a deeper impact than we might realize is going on.

I remember in Salt Lake City I had a shoulder surgery to repair a torn labrum. Because of the tear, there was also a cyst that developed in my shoulder, which was actually what caused the pain I felt that led me to the doctor. So the surgeon was supposed to also drain the cyst. After the surgery, I was told that they weren’t able to drain the cyst – every time they tried to poke it with a needle, it just shifted around. They couldn’t get the needle in it to drain it,

so the left the cyst there. I remember telling this to my pastor, Phil Hughes, who was also my boss. He came by shortly after I got home from the hospital to see how I was doing. I have to pause and ask: How many of you have ever taken prescription pain medication? So you know, as I now do, that they can have some strange side-effects. I didn't know that at that moment. The doctor prescribed Percocet. I'll never take it again. Thanks to that stuff, as I told him this and expressed my disappointment that they couldn't get the cyst out, I burst into tears. I started crying like a baby. I was a blubbering mess, an emotional train-wreck. I continued to be emotional (for people who brought food, mowed my lawn, etc.). Of course, Gwen thought it was great: "He's finally connecting with his feelings!" But Phil was someone I could talk to, and his willingness to just listen, and the help through meals and work at our house that people gave was such a blessing. And the impact of all that still continues today as it becomes a sermon illustration. We might say that the didn't know what they were doing. They didn't know that their help would still be remembered by me, and impact a whole congregation some 12 years later. So sometimes we do things, or we don't do things, and the impact is much bigger than we ever realized, which we see in the second half of Jesus' statement.

In the first part, he extends forgiveness. We need forgiveness in our lives – whether we realize we need it or not. Relationships and community would be impossible without forgiveness. Just this week I had to ask forgiveness for something from someone. In fact, there were two or three people I had to ask for forgiveness. Not that that's anything new or particularly unusual, mind you...but it happened.

With this statement here on the cross, Jesus shows us how to forgive, and in doing so, he shows us that we need to be forgiven. Sometimes we need to be forgiven and we don't know it. We hurt others with our words, and we don't know it. We hurt others with our actions, and we don't know it. We hurt ourselves, and we don't know it. We hurt God with our lies, our denials modeled after Peter's...and sometimes we don't even know it. It's so easy to be stuck in a rut of selfish living that hurts everyone around us, that we don't even recognize that we're doing it to them, to ourselves, and to God.

Still, Jesus speaks these words to you and to me as he did to the people there: “Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing.” Imagine if we allowed these words to really impact our lives. Imagine if, first of all, we were truly aware of the fact that we need forgiveness. In other words, what if we really realized “what we are doing.” Sometimes we go through life not recognizing how we impact others – that we’ve hurt them in some way. We’re ignorant and oblivious...or worse, we intentionally turn aside from our recognition of the hurt we’ve caused. So forgiveness is never asked for.

Other times we see that we need forgiveness, but we're ignorant about the depth or the breadth to which we need it. We’ve hurt people and don’t realize the depth of pain we’ve caused. So we treat forgiveness cheaply or flippantly and don't allow it to transform the way in which we live. In both of those situations, we keep on hurting others, and hurting ourselves...and God’s transformative work in us is minimized. We don’t grow in discipleship to Jesus and become more Christ-like in our living.

But imagine if we became fully aware of our need for forgiveness and then graciously and humbly sought it out. It could transform relationships.

Then, on the other side of that same coin: **Imagine what it would be like if Jesus' attitude, and his heavenly Father's attitude, became ours: what if we forgave as he forgives?** Imagine what this church would be like, what your marriage would be like, what your workplace would be like, what your school would be like, what your neighborly relations would be like if we lived out forgiven and forgiving lives. Imagine if you got together with someone who had hurt you – whether they realized it or not – and you forgave them. That’s what Jesus does here, just shortly after being put up on the cross. Now, it is true, that he asks his Heavenly Father to forgive them...but by extension, Jesus is forgiving them. He can’t ask his Father to forgive them without doing it himself as well. We can’t ask God to forgive someone when we can’t forgive them ourselves. What if we got together with the people who had hurt us and prayed with them and for them? What if we brought that kind of forgiveness into the world around us? And maybe we’re tempted to say, “Oh, that sounds a little dangerous, and really hard.” Well, **Jesus was on the cross when he did it, so I think we can, too.** Talk about

hard. He sets that bar pretty high when it comes to “forgiving when the circumstances are tough.”

And if we did forgive like that, the world would be a radically different place! So much of the hostility, anger, resentment, alienation, divorces, wars, emotional scars, relational conflicts, and more would be healed in Jesus' name...I mean, we could even see Huskies and Cougars joining together in harmony! If we would only allow Jesus' words to penetrate into our deepest being, transform us, become a part of the very fabric of who we are, and then share it with others. Forgiveness is not easy work to do. If it were easy, then all that brokenness and hostility wouldn't be a problem in our lives...we wouldn't need sermons and books on it or encouragement to do it. Forgiveness is hard, hard work.

But it is the work that Jesus models for us on the cross and in these words. He does that hard work. And we need to be forgiven, whether we know it or not. And God desires to extend forgiveness, to bring healing to the relationship between us and him, and through us to others as well as we live out forgiveness. Let's turn to God and ask for His forgiveness. Let's turn to others and ask for their forgiveness and extend it to them as well. Let's each ask God this morning to show us who we need to forgive. Let's ask God to show us who we need to ask for forgiveness from – including from God himself. And then, let's ask him for the courage, the grace, and the right words, to go forward and speak with whomever it is that God puts on your heart. We need this kind of forgiveness in our lives. And it's offered through the cross of Christ and in these words as Jesus prays for forgiveness – for his crucifiers, for others gathered around, and for you and for me, even when we don't know what we're doing. Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ Some other translations put this verse in brackets, or give it a footnote, to let the reader know that many early manuscripts (from the 2nd Century A.D.) do not have these words from Jesus. An equal number of early manuscripts do – so the fact that some don't doesn't in any way invalidate the prayer. In fact, looking at Stephen's similar prayer in Acts 7 when he was martyred, and the recording of James' martyrdom in other literature, where in both we see a similar prayer to Jesus', indicates that Jesus probably did actually say these words and that they influenced the early Christians in their attitude toward their persecutors. This seems especially likely given the Jewish/Old Testament prevailing attitude of “God vindicate me and judge my oppressors” rather than “Lord have mercy on them.” Jesus' prayer was a radical transformation and new way of living/praying that he taught elsewhere (Luke 6:27-29, 12:10), and now lived out on the cross with this powerful and unexpected prayer. We would expect early Jewish Christians to continue in their Jewish tradition of prayer in the midst of persecution, but given the two examples cited here, we see that was not the case; the likely explanation for this is that Jesus in fact showed them on the cross how to pray: to ask for/extend forgiveness even to one's “enemies.”