

Have you ever talked with anyone who seems to end or begin every sentence with either, “I’m sorry,” or “Forgive me”?

Sitting on the side of the highway waiting to catch speeding drivers, a Highway Patrolman over in Berea sees a car pattering along at just 25 MPH. He thinks to himself, “This driver is just as dangerous as a speeder.”

So, he turns on his lights and pulls over the driver. Approaching the car, he notices that there are five women in the car.

The driver and another woman in the front seat and three women in the back--eyes wide and white as ghosts.

The driver, obviously confused, says to the patrolman, “Forgive me, Sir, I was doing exactly the speed limit. What seems to be the problem?”

“M’am,” the officer replies, “You weren’t speeding, but driving slower than the speed limit can also be a danger to other drivers.”

“Forgive me, Officer, slower than the speed limit?” she asked. “No sir, I was doing the speed limit exactly Twenty-Five miles an hour just like the sign says!” the driver says a bit proudly.

The patrolmen, trying to contain a chuckle, explains to her, “Twenty-five is the highway number, not the speed limit.”

A bit embarrassed, the woman grinned, said she was sorry, and thanked the patrolman for pointing out her error.

“But before I let you go, M’am, I have to ask, ‘Is everyone in this car ok?’ These women seem awfully shaken, and they haven’t muttered a single peep this whole time.”

The driver replied: ‘Forgive me, Sir. Oh yes, they’ll be alright in a minute. We just got off 183.’

Today, we conclude our sermon series on Lament and Forgiveness. Our sermon this morning is about forgiveness. And, the sermon text is taken from the gospel according to Luke 23:32-38.

32 *Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with Jesus.*

33 *When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.*

34 *Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots to divide his clothing.*

35 *And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of*

God, his chosen one!”

36 *The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine,*

37 *and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”*

38 *There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Pray with me please. *Clear our minds, oh God, and open our hearts for your message to us this morning. Amen.*

Today, we observe both Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday.

On Palm Sunday, we remember Jesus’s entering into Jerusalem and being greeted by the people waving palm branches.

The Triumphal Entry of Jesus Christ into Jerusalem marks the high point of his earthly ministry.

But today is also Passion Sunday, a day when we remember the story, which I just read, of the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth.

Pastor Jennifer shared these powerful quotes from Richard Rohr with me this week: “[t]he cross was Jesus’ voluntary acceptance of undeserved suffering as an act of total solidarity with the pain of the world.”

He “hung in the crucified middle and paid the price for all such reconciliation with reality in its wounded state; then he invited us to do the same.”

The people watch. The leaders scoff. And the soldiers mock. But, that’s not I want to talk about this morning.

Instead, my sole focus is going to be on Jesus’s prayer in verse 34 when “*Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they’re doing.’*”

Who’s the “them” Jesus wants God to forgive? Who’s the “they,” who don’t know what they’re doing?

Jesus is on the cross. He’s facing death. He’s dealing with incredible and treacherous pain. But, he’s not concerned about himself.

No, he’s concerned about the ones who’re killing him, the ones who don’t even know what they are doing. But, who are “them” and “they”?

Is it the soldiers? Perhaps it’s the Roman soldiers, who routinely put men to death, he’s referring to here. Are they the “them” and “they” Jesus mentions in his prayer?

Or, is it Pilate? As you may recall, against the rule of law, he still

gives the order for the crucifixion. He's found Jesus not guilty of the crimes with which he'd been charged.

Yet, the pressure of the Jewish leaders and his fear of a riot "forced" him to go against his own better judgment. He signs the death warrant and then washes his hands of the whole sorry affair.

Or is it the chief priests and scribes? They are, after all, the prime force behind the crucifixion. They're determined to kill him.

They paid off Judas for his betrayal, sent soldiers to arrest him in the Garden of Gethsemane, brought his case before Pilate, and stirred up the crowd to demand that Jesus be crucified.

Perhaps it's the chief priests and scribes that Jesus was asking God to forgive.

Or, was it Pharisees and Sadducees? The Sadducees discredited him. And, the Pharisees are the first to actively plot Jesus' death. Perhaps it's the Pharisees and Sadducees who Jesus is asking God to forgive.

Ancient commentators seem to universally apply Jesus's prayer, not to the Romans, but, to the Jews. And, the early Christians were certain that Jews were responsible for Jesus's death.

“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

With so many choices, whom does Jesus really mean?

Jesus here models for us how to respond when we’re wronged, scorned, betrayed, and offended with a simply prayer. *“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”*

Dr. Harry Blake has been the pastor of the Mount Canaan Church in Shreveport, Louisiana for more than fifty years.

I heard that and thought to myself, “That church sure must be a lot easier to pastor than some of the difficult churches, not this one, I’ve served over the years.”

In talking about his ministry at Mount Canaan for all of those years, Dr. Blake talks about, in 1963, that awful bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham Alabama on Sunday, September 15, 1963, when those four little African-American girls were killed during Sunday School, and injured between twenty-two other people.

Four members of a local Ku Klux Klan chapter had planted nineteen sticks of dynamite attached to a timing device beneath the steps of the church located on the east side of the church.

It was one of the worst moments in United States' history. Martin Luther King Jr. described it at the time as "one of the most vicious and tragic crimes ever perpetrated against humanity."

Dr. Blake said, after that bombing, "I asked the Chief of Police of Shreveport, as many pastors in Shreveport asked whether we could have a six block peaceful march to remember those four little girls.

But, he didn't answer me for a week.

Sunday came. And, the Police Commissioner and nine Shreveport, Louisiana policemen came and dragged me out of my church.

And beat me and left me for dead. In the church yard."

Forty years later, the city council formally apologized to Dr. Blake for what those men did to him.

The reason I'm telling you about that is this:

When that Police Commissioner was dying, do you know who he begged to and come and pray with him?

One name. One face. "Please send Dr. Harry Blake to pray with me," the Police Commissioner said.

And, Dr. Blake went and prayed with the man, who'd dragged him

out of the church and left him for dead.

How can anyone do that? To go and pray with that man like Dr. Blake did. There's only one way.

And, that's when you've centered your life around Jesus's prayer, "*Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.*"

"God, forgive them. And, I'm going to forgive them, too."

And, when you can say that, it can transform the worst thing that life throws at you.

"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they're doing."

Let me turn back to my earlier question. Who's the "them" and the "they" in Jesus's prayer?

Is it the Romans? Is it the Jews? Or, is it someone else?

Barbara Brown Taylor, best-selling author, teacher, and Episcopal priest Episcopal, points out that "if this sacrifice is truly God's will, then why [do the Romans or the Jews] need forgiving at all? They are simply playing their assigned parts, so that God's will may be done."

So, if the Romans and the Jews don't need forgiving in that they were "simply playing their assigned parts, so that God's will may be done[,]"

who's left?

Who is the "them" and the "they" in Jesus's prayer? It has to be us, doesn't it? We're the only ones who're left.

He's praying for you and me on the cross.

He's asking God to forgive us for all of the times we've crucified him, or stood by and let someone else do it? By what we've done and left undone.

With each and every one of our sins, we crucify Jesus Christ.

And, unlike those who actually put Jesus to death, we actually know who he is. We proclaim him as our Lord and Savior. They did not.

Yet, we continue to crucify him.

And, how does Jesus respond when we sin, when we continue to crucify him?

He asks God to forgive us. And Jesus, being Jesus, even gives us the benefit of the doubt. He tells God that we don't even know what we're doing.

And, because we've been forgiven, Taylor says that Jesus "even gave us a prayer to pray if we should ever find our own hands hammered down:

‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’”

Jesus asks God to forgive us. And, he shows us how to respond when someone needs our forgiveness.

In Lorraine Hansberry’s play, *Raisin in the Sun*, an African-American family inherits \$10,000 from the father’s life insurance policy.

The mother of the household sees in this legacy the chance to escape the ghetto life of Harlem and move into a little house with flower boxes out in the countryside.

The brilliant daughter of this family sees in the money the chance to live out her dream and go to medical school.

But, the older brother has a plea that’s difficult to ignore.

He begs for the money so that he and his friend can go into business together.

He tells the family that, with the money, he can finally make something of himself and make things good for the rest of them.

He promises that if he can just have the money, he can give back to the family all the blessings that their hard lives have denied them.

Against the Mother’s better judgment, she gives into the pleas of her

son.

She has to admit that life's chances have never been good for him that he deserves the chance that this money might give him. So, she gives him the money. All \$10, 000 of it. And, the so-called friend skips town with the money.

The desolate son has to return home and break the news to his family that their hopes for the future have been stolen and their dreams for a better life are gone.

His sister lashes into him with a barrage of ugly epithets. She calls him every despicable thing that she could imagine. Her contempt for her brother has no limits.

When she takes a breath in the midst of her tirade the mother interrupts her and says, "I thought I taught you to love him."

Bernatha, the daughter, answers, "Love him? There's nothing left to love."

But, the Mother responds: "There's always something left to love. And if you ain't learned that, you ain't learned nothing."

"Have you cried for that baby boy today, I don't mean for yourself in

the family because we lost all that money. I mean for him: for what he's been through and what it done to him."

"Child, when do you think is the time to love some by the most: when they done good and made things easy for everybody?"

"Well then, you ain't through learning, because that ain't the time at all. It's when he's at his lowest and can't believe in himself cause the world done whip team so."

"When you starts measure and somebody, measure him right, child, measure him right. Make sure you done taking into account what hills and valleys he done come through before he got to wherever he is."

That's forgiveness! That's love that's given when it's not deserved. It's forgiveness when it's not earned. It's a gift that flows like a refreshing stream to quench the fires of angry condemning words.

How much more loving and forgiving is God's love for us? And how much more is the grace of God for us?

I'm talking to someone today. You came into this room in a hot mess. You're burdened down and loaded up, crushed under and oppressed by what the world has thrown at you.

Here's the take home message for you, and for everyone else in this room. Here's what I want for you to get from this sermon.

Jesus loves you, is always with you, accepts you, forgives you, and renews you, and, as another pastor put it, 'washes behind our ears.'

Because of Jesus Christ, we have forgiveness and healing for our pasts, help for our present, and hope for our futures.

And, Jesus calls you and me to forgive just as we were when Jesus prayed for us on the cross, "*Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing*"

THIS IS THE GOSPEL.

THIS IS THE GOOD NEWS.

AND, IT'S TRUE.

THANKS BE TO GOD.

AMEN.