And Jesus said, *Forgive them, for they know not what they do*

A Sermon

by Wilson Yates

Hennepin Avenue United Methodist Church, February 14th—the first Sunday of Lent—2016

On this Sunday morning after Ash Wednesday, we enter into the high holy season of Lent. This is a season of ashes, ashes marked on our forehead, but more, ashes marked on our souls.

In time, we will celebrate with palm leave and the flowering of lilies. In that time Skylar, our five-year-old granddaughter, will wear a new dress and if I could have my way a white straw hat, but that will be overruled by her grandmother who knows Skylar’s attitude towards such hats; Easter eggs will be hidden, partly in the snow, and, then, will be found in triumphal delight; and in church those rousing hymns, the words with which we might not feel comfortable if we really were to read them over, will give way to full Halleluiahs.

And, then, the sermon about resurrection—always in my little Missouri delta Methodist church, where I grew up, there was woven in something about the jonquils and the budding of new life in the spring. I have often thought that that metaphor doesn’t quite ring right in Minnesota. The sermon. About how our souls can be enlivened, our spirits freed, and our lives made more loving, more kind, more grace-filled, because Jesus died so that we would know what it would mean to have a grace-filled life. About the spirit of God having broken through the tomb moving through us all, moving through all of creation like van Gogh’s *Starry Night*. And, then, we would
go home to a large and sumptuous Easter dinner with the forsythia bush blooming outside the window.

But for these weeks, it is not Easter. It is Lent. It is a time of exploration that takes us onto the black and white landscape of ourselves, of our faith, where doubts and worries and discontents are intermingled with the laughter of love and certainty about life, all intermingled as if to remind us that all is ashes to ashes and dust to dust—all is mortal; yet all, too, is the melting of the snow and the birth of new life from the rich black soil where the ashes are strewn. It is a season of turning inward and laying bare who we are, laying bare the shadows and light, the places we wish not to go, as well as the places where we wish to go. It is a time of meditation on who we have been, who we are, who we would be. This is the season when we look at our faith and remember how through our doubts and uncertainty we have fallen like the Greek myth’s Dea
dalus from the sky into the dark wine sea, and, yet, how we know, too, that we have been cloaked in the assurance that God, though hidden and beyond our reach, can still be known, and we soar with the warmth of faith like lightening stars in the dark blue of a starry night.

On our spiritual journey, in this season, we return to the religious questions and experiences that sometimes haunt us, sometimes nourish us: “Why is God so absent when the ravages of war are so present?” a student always. And a friend of late years, “Are my prayers really any more than empty words lost in space”? And the poignant words of a middle aged woman remembering, “Will the sadness of what happened those years back ever ever come to rest so that I might be at peace?” And from a friend, “God left a long time ago and there was no forwarding address.” Lent is a time of
ashes when like Jesus in the garden, we enter the darkness knowing that for a while there may be no light. We dwell there on the stones at the end of the path and take stock of who we are and, then pray, “Oh God, come out of Job’s whirlwind and sit with me on these stones at the end of the path and we’ll have tea again even if the walls about us are crumbling.”

But Lent is more than somberness. Indeed, ashes are also alive, chemically, physically alive, but, also, metaphorically alive, for they carry the memories of who we are and what we are about. As the ashes are the memories of the logs that were burned, and the logs the trees, and the trees the soil, and the soil with my hands sifting its dirt for the planting of the tree –the ashes from the tree are the bearers of our memories that are about who we are. They bear the memories that have made us understand the world about us and perhaps realize some modicum of wisdom and, perchance, humility. They bear the moments when we have known our own sinfulness and brokenness, and they bear the memories of our times of peace when we have known the quiet beauty of love. It is a season when we ask about God and perhaps try to sort out the God of love who we say is in our midst with the same God of mystery beyond all human comprehension. It is a time when we ask who am I in relation to Jesus Christ--- the moments, stories, words from his life that live in me, trouble me, judge me, save me, nourish me.

Our text this morning is a story that invites us to encounter who we are in relationship to Jesus. In Luke (26:33,34) it is written “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. Then Jesus said. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they
are doing”. Or, to use the King James Version that is poetically more powerful: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”.

I wish to dwell a moment on the question of forgiving and receiving forgiveness—the truly virtuous acts that are essential to the living of a good and loving life. Throughout scripture Jesus returns to its importance as a part of the fabric of the religious life. He did not create the importance of forgiveness, for forgiveness and what is involved in forgiving is a deeply rooted experience in all of human life. But Jesus gave it theological significance as that which God intends for us as a means to our own salvation.

But, of course, there are those who neither forgive nor seek forgiveness. We need only think of Donald Trump who decided on the campaign trail in Iowa to go to a local Presbyterian church, the denomination he claims as his own. Later he was asked about his relationship to the church. Among other responses, he said that one thing he never does is ask for forgiveness. In general, it can be said that most self-enclosed personalities feel as Mr. Trump does. They simply assume that all of their actions have been good actions. Why seek forgiveness? But most of us do not live in Mr. Trump’s self-righteous bubble. Rather we live with a sense of life as morally ambiguous where we are conscious of our self-centeredness even as we live out moments of self—giving, and, indeed, conscious of how our actions blend all-too-well our self-interest with our loving of others. Life is not clean and pure; we feel guilty and we need to seek forgiveness even as we may feel that our own moral compass guides us as well.
There is a second example regarding forgiveness admittedly of a lighter nature. This has to do with our five year old Skylar Sophia Yates, who I referred to earlier. Skylar goes to Kindergarten at Whittier school. I went to the teacher’s conference for her in the fall and was told that she was an excellent marvelous student—a leader, a favorite member of the class who seems to like everyone and garners easily their friendship. We were somewhat alarmed, therefore, when her father—perhaps happy to demythologize this child in his parents minds—brought word that Skylar had stepped out of character and pinched one of the other girls. Pinching, I understand, is the high-risk way of making a statement in Kindergarten. Her teacher asked Skylar to apologize and she refused even while recognizing that she would have to suffer “time out” wherein she would sit in a corner chair and talk to no one for five minutes—a true punishment for an extrovert like her. But she followed without protest and took her time out. The problem is that after it was over, she still had no inclination to apologize. I should add that she and the girl are friends again. It is the adults that are left to worry.

Even with its limited sophistication as a case study, the incident reveals that the process of forgiving is not a matter of good social graces or utilitarian political action. It is a matter of being emotionally and morally at a place where one can forgive with authenticity. There must be a desire to forgive and a desire to accept such forgiveness. And there, most often, must be an apology as a way of asking for forgiveness, an apology or repentance or the acknowledgment of guilt.

And in a more serious vein, I want to remind us of our own recent history as a nation and a church. The event is one we all know well, that of the St. Matthew’s
African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina in which the congregation, including its own survivors of the incident, chose to forgive the young man who had drawn a gun and killed as many as he could in the group—the group that had only a brief time earlier welcomed him to their bible study. Absorbing the horrendous actions of the man was not easy for a society or the church already struggling with so much violence, but the congregation, without judging, chose to forgive the boy. “Jesus said, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Let us turn to the crucifixion and the words of forgiveness.

The life of Jesus is a powerful drama—And the crucifixion—the third act of his life, is set starkly in contrast to what has come before: the birth narratives, the preaching of the parables, the Sermon on the Mount, the story of his ministry. The third act shifts markedly from this more pastoral life of the first acts. It begins with Palm Sunday that welcomes Jesus to Jerusalem with a parade led by his followers welcoming him with palm leaves. The story then unfolds with moments of accusation and turmoil leading to the trial, and then there are the charges of the High and the Chief priests, the judgment of the Roman ruler, Pilate, and the actions of his soldiers, and the people, who eventually become the mob—all were actors along with his followers, that small band, watching the unfolding events in disbelief and sorrow with some haunted by the question. “Was he not who he said he was?” His body would be taken down by Nicodemus and laid into the lap of Mary. There beside him would be Mary Magdalene and John. A Roman crucifixion—a common means of exercising the death penalty to those who are guilty of crimes against the empire: incitement to riot, crimes against religious law, and crimes against the people that lead to revolt.
The unfolding events: denial by Peter, betrayal by Judas, two criminals hanging on each side one denying and one pleading as if they were the remnants of a Greek Chorus, down to the mocking crowd that taunted him to save himself, if he were truly the all-powerful Messiah. And so we wait. The taunting dies down. The soldiers, rough hewn, lift the body to the beams, nail, curse, roll the dice for the robe. They do what they are paid to do, the precursors of the Nazi guards who pled ignorance of wrong doing for they were only taking orders. The Jewish Council, whose members were theologians and politicians called to protect God’s law. They feel justice has been served and the laws of God protected. And Pilate. In a Rembrandt painting, Pilate is portrayed as one washing his hands as if he were a Shakespearan Lady McBeth—washing his hands as if the guilt can be washed away. In response to all that happened, Jesus speaks words that strangely carry no anger, no call for revenge, nor any final blessing for his followers to hear. Just the words: “Father forgiven them for they know not what they do.”

Let us listen to the scenes with some empathy for the characters and what they say is at stake. Perhaps we will see, if not ourselves, our world about us expressed in public discourse. Pilate speaks: “How dare this messiah impugn the Roman ruler. I, Pilate, am the voice of an empire whose charge is to maintain order. When they brought Jesus before me, I listened. I remind you that I saw no reason to crucify him and I proposed that he simply be flogged. Indeed, I call your attention to the script and not the rummaggings of your imaginations. It is written that he was so arrogant and disruptive in the eyes of the Jewish leaders that they were forced to seek his crucifixion. They even bargained with me, for God’s sake. Let Barabas go. What
choice did I have. I responded in what I would call a simple act of justice based on equity. One radical insurrectionist for another. Jesus, whatever nonsense he may have preached, had riled the Jewish leaders who I invest a great deal of myself and my talents in keeping satisfied. I report to Rome and what I report, this case in point, must give cause for Rome to be well-satisfied. I am a ruler, not a philosopher, a political man, not a religious one. I did what must be done in the interest of Rome’s security.

And nay, contrary to your judgments, I am a good man. I sentenced him according to the laws of Rome, I ended the problem I had with the unruly Jewish leaders. I acted in the best interest of the people. I am a good man and I take umbrage at your Rembrandt. I had no guilt and the washing of my hands was only a gesture of ridding myself of this whole abominable situation. Indeed, if I am to apologize than let me say, in the words of today: “If my actions, taken in good faith, have caused anyone distress, then I hope you will accept my apology, for I meant no harm”. “Heavens, what mendacity, if I were to have said that.” And now to Jesus, I simply say, regarding your matter of asking God to forgive me, I worship Rome, not God. And to your last little poetic flourish about my not knowing what I was doing. I should say only that it is a sign of my mercy that I ignored that act of impudence. What can I say? Jesus is praying that forgiveness be given to a man who seeks no forgiveness and knows that he is a good man. Why should I, a good man, seek forgiveness. And why should I, a good man, be told that he did not know what he was doing, when it is obvious to all that I did. I have spoken.

And there was the Jewish Council, the high priest, the chief priests, the elders and scribes. The theologians—I, Wilson, am one of those—and rulers of the time, the
keepers of the law, the interpreters of the law, and the judges of all who would violate the law. One chief priest speaks, “I must say to you that we dealt with Jesus with due process. We were judicious. We did not accept the ranting charges of the riffraff that he was a traitor. But then, please put yourselves in our shoes, it was reported that he would destroy the temple, destroy the house of God. And that he claimed to be the Messiah—that is blasphemous. In a court, a judgment must flow from the evidence. Therefore, he was necessarily found guilty of blasphemy, of false claims, guilty of violating the laws of God and seeking to overturn the ordained rule of God. We are good religious leaders who insist upon an orderly way sanctioned by our good judgment and God’s religious laws. To claim that we did not know what we were doing is absurd. We knew well that we must preserve the foundations of our faith. We are good leaders. It is not we who should seek forgiveness, but this broken body of a man hanging from where all should hang who have blasphemed the rule of God.

And the third voice in the drama: the people who become a mob chanting for blood. They cried, “Save yourself, if you are the Messiah, for the Messiah is all-powerful.” One stepped out and spoke. “I once heard him preach. Did he not have rebellious intent in his words. He spoke of liberating those who are in jail. And who are in jail but those who are criminals—social untouchables, the crazy ones—but, I say to you, who better than they from whom to recruit his army. He spoke of the poor. The poor—the rabble who will not work, the misbegotten that invade our land and dirty our streets. And the sick. How quaint. The sick should have a red line on their door for later pick-up. Or a wall built around their shacks to keep them out.”
And then a second person spoke, “He would have God forgive us. We are the righteous ones. Of what are we to be forgiven? Is our goodness not enough. But this Jesus says in his prayer, we did not know what we were doing. I tell you we knew and we could feel the truth of it in our bones as we all chanted with our chant to crucify him until it became for us a great hymn to heaven. Do you understand the thrill of chanting crucify him. How could it not be the truth. I say to you, Aren’t our deepest feelings that rose to a pitch beyond reason not inevitably the deepest truth?” And the mob continued its chant.

All need their day in court, as the saying goes. These scenarios, with a bit of poetic license from me, were their statements. But their statements reveal that they missed the point.

Their actions and their defenses, Jesus ignores. Let the lawyers concern themselves with that. Instead, he prays, that God forgive them in spite of what they have done, and then he offers a plea of understanding insisting that they did not know what they were doing. Let us consider the prayer.

For Jesus, God is one who receives and forgives in spite of our failures, in spite of our wrongdoings, in spite of our own self-righteousness. Jesus has preached this over and over again and no more powerfully than in the parable of the Prodigal Son. What could the prodigal son say in his defense. Nothing. A wasted life broken by his own wanton excess. But the father in the parable, a symbol for God, receives him, his lost son, reaches out to hold him and says I forgive you. He does not ask for repentance, for apology, for an expression of guilt. He simply forgives him. This does not mean that he will not be questioned, called to task, taught again what it means to be good,
but that must come later and it never invalidate his forgiveness. When we forgive, it does not mean that we will not have to pick up the pieces of that which was broken often the remains of losses and memories of hurt that have been inflicted. But forgiveness provides a new beginning. In Rembrandt’s painting of The Prodigal Son, the boy is on his knees, the father leaning over him with his hands in an embrace saying I forgive you knowing that for the boy to stand up, to accept his guilt, to be again able to believe in himself, for the boy to know and respond to what his devastating actions have been, he must know that he is received, he is loved, he is forgiven for in forgiveness we are made aware that we are still, in spite of what we did, accepted. And, paradoxically, in being forgiven our wrongdoings, we are offered the power to make amends, to again become a human being with the possibility of new life. Forgiveness invites—allows—us to say from the depths of our being, it is time for the healing of the wounds.

This is the forgiveness that Jesus gives from the cross. But there is more in his prayer. For he says that these figures, Pilate, the High priest, the people cum mob, did not know what they were doing. And therein lies Jesus judgment. His charge is that they did not grasp the truth of their actions that they were crucifying an innocent man—but more, that they were crucifying the truth that he brought to them. They could not see themselves as they were, for they were locked in their own fears, their political calculations, their emotional absoluteness, and, above all, their self-interest that led them to believe that they alone knew the truth, they alone had the truth, even while, paradoxically, the truth had forsaken them.
In this Lenten season, let us reflect upon the question of forgiveness. In closing these too many words, still, let me end where most liturgies call us to begin, with a prayer of confession.

“Forgive me, Oh God, for I know I have been found wanting and stand in need of forgiveness. My misdoings weigh upon my heart, my wrong doings weigh still in my memory, my selfishness destroys my spirit and my arrogance condemns me to blindness. Forgive me, Oh God, and return me to whom I am created to be—loving and whole, my spirit alive in the world and responsive to the needs of others. Oh God, from the depths of me, I pray, keep me from falling into the darkness of the sea, free, oh free, my spirit to soar in the warmth of faith like a lightening star in the dark blue of a starry night.

Amen and Amen.

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