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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
2/25/2015, Midweek Lent 1  
Luke 23:34  
Sermon by Theologian Gilbert Meilaender

### The First Word

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

*Jesus, I will ponder now,  
On your holy passion. . . .  
Make me see your great distress,  
Anguish and affliction,  
Bonds and stripes and wretchedness  
And your crucifixion.*

And the wonder of it is that, when we ponder that anguish and affliction, that great distress, the *first* word we hear from the crucified one is: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” Forgive whom?

- ✚ Forgive the soldiers—They’re tough men, hardened by the burdens they’ve borne sustaining Rome’s far-flung empire. They know how quickly disorder can break out if they don’t do their job swiftly and effectively. And so, in the service of that great good, the public order, which cannot be sustained without them, they crucify the Lord of Glory.
- ✚ Forgive Pilate—The little we know of him from other sources suggests that he was probably in over his head as Roman Procurator of Judea. Sent from Rome to try to govern people whom he did not understand very well and who were constantly unhappy and restless under Roman rule. Struggling as best he could—within the limits of his understanding and ability—to maintain a very fragile peace. And so, in the service of that great good, and there are few goods greater than peace, Pilate sentences to crucifixion the Lord of Glory.
- ✚ Forgive the chief priests—They were Sadducees, who could not have been very sympathetic to some aspects of this rabbi Jesus’s teaching. But still, he was a fellow Jew, and they turned against him only because they thought they had to for the sake of the whole people. They knew how dangerous it would be to bring down Rome’s wrath upon tiny Judea. And so, in the service of that great good, the survival of God’s chosen people, they urge crucifixion of the Lord of Glory.
- ✚ Forgive the other leaders of the people—Deeply pious Jews, they were sincerely committed to following as best they could the way of life God had given Israel to mark her out as his holy people. And that very way of life, which came from God, seemed to compel them to consider Jesus a blasphemer. “We have a law,” as they say in John’s Gospel (19:7), God’s law, “and by that

law he ought to die.” And so, in the service of that great good, obedience to Israel’s God, they support the crucifixion of the Lord of Glory.

They didn’t know what they were doing. All of them, in their different ways, trying to accomplish something good. And it is the deep mystery—even, in some ways, the offense—of sin, that its roots lie in the desire to do good. All these people trying to make things work out right—and what a mess they made of it. “Father, forgive them,” Jesus says.

*Yet, O Lord, not thus alone  
Make me see your passion. . . .  
For I also and my sin  
Wrought your deep affliction;  
This the shameful cause has been  
Of your crucifixion.*

How similarly rooted in our own love for what is good are the sins that wrought Jesus’s deep affliction. Forgive *us*.

- ✦ Caring for our children—and wanting so much to help them succeed—and often in over our heads at that task. Sometimes pushing too hard, other times giving too much freedom. And so, in the service of that great good, their happiness, forgetting that only God can guarantee that happiness.
- ✦ Loving our parents—and caring so much about them that we cannot accept in them the weaknesses and failings we so easily excuse in others. And so, in the service of that great good, the special affection we have for them, failing to honor them as God’s representatives before us.
- ✦ Wanting to be friendly toward others—not wishing to alienate them by making a point of disagreements or insisting on being different. And so, in the service of that great good, and there are few goods greater than friendship, turning aside from Jesus and the different way of life to which he calls us.
- ✦ Trying to carry out our work efficiently and productively—hoping to leave behind a legacy of accomplishment. And so, in the service of that great good, important goals we have set for ourselves and the institutions we serve, overriding all too often the claims and needs of others, in whom we ought to see the face of Christ.

Forgive us.

All of us, in our different ways, aiming at something good. All of us, in our different ways, trying to make things work out right—and, all too often, making a mess of it. Helping to crucify the Lord of Glory.

And, therefore, of us also, and for us also, Jesus speaks from the cross. Luke writes: “Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.’” And in fact, it would be perfectly accurate to translate Luke just a little differently, to

translate it this way as a continuing action: “Jesus kept on saying, ‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.’” On this Good Friday we can and should make it a present tense: Jesus *keeps on saying*.

This is not a word spoken only once with reference to soldiers, Roman governor, leaders of the people. It is a word repeated. It is a prayer of forgiveness that echoes through the centuries. A prayer for the countless generations of humanity—for all of us—who want so much to accomplish something good, and who can’t seem to get it right. “I also and my sin / Wrought your deep affliction.”

In the face of that failure, our failure—day after day, year after year—the crucified Jesus keeps on saying of and for each of us: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”