the seven last words of christ #1:
father, forgive them
3.13.11
Rev. Brent Wright
Broad Ripple UMC

Luke 23:33-35a 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.” And they cast lots to divide his clothing. The people stood by, watching.

Matthew 5:44-45 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

Last words matter. There are the funny ‘famous last words’, those predictions that the speakers wish they could take back when they turn out to be way off the mark, like a Western Union internal memo in 1876: “This 'telephone' has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us.” Or a Yale University management professor in the 1960s, responding to Fred Smith’s paper proposing an overnight delivery service, wrote,”The concept is interesting and well-formed, but in order to earn better than a 'C,' the idea must be feasible." Smith went on to found Federal Express. Or, "We don’t like their sound, and guitar music is on the way out." That’s how the Decca Recording Co. rejected the Beatles in 1962.

And then there are the more serious kind of last words: the last things people say before they die. Lists of last words make for interesting reading; they are sometimes completely mundane, since the person didn’t know they were about to die, and they are sometimes contrived, as if the person polished and practiced their speech for years. But they’re often a glimpse into the person’s life, because what people say in their last moments can be quite a reflection of their approach to life.

Some people reach the end of life with regret and sadness: Vincent Van Gogh, the painter tortured by depression, wrote in his suicide note, “The sadness will last forever.” Leonardo da Vinci regretted not achieving perfection: "I have offended God and mankind because my work did not reach the quality it should have." Queen Elizabeth I of England knew that
there’s something far more valuable than riches: "All my possessions for a moment of time."

Sometimes folks get stuck with words they didn’t intend to be remembered as last words: the great wordsmith Winston Churchill, before slipping into a coma 9 days before his death, last said, "I’m bored with it all." Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, after being shot, realized he wasn’t ready to speak his last words: "Don’t let me die like this, say I said something."

Perhaps the most interesting last words come from Death Row, where those about to be executed have had plenty of time to think about what they’ll say. Some take the opportunity for one last punch line, like Frederick Charles Wood, who was electrocuted in 1951 in New York. He said, "Gents, this is an educational project. You are about to witness the damaging effect electricity has on Wood." James French, about to die in the electric chair in 1966 (can you see this one coming?), shouted to the press, "Hey, fellas! How about this for a headline for tomorrow’s paper: 'French Fries!'" And others take the moment more seriously. William Corder, just before he was hanged in 1828, said, "I am guilty. My sentence is just. I deserve my fate. And may God have mercy on my soul." Sean Flannagan’s last words, spoken to the executioner in 1989 in New York: "I love you."

Jesus of Nazareth was executed as a criminal. Seven last words that Jesus spoke during his execution are recorded in the gospels:

1. While he was being nailed to the cross: "Father forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing."
2. To the person being executed next to him: "Today you will be with me in Paradise."
3. To his mother and his close friend: "Woman, here is your son. …Here is your mother."
4. To God: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
5. To those watching his execution: "I’m thirsty."
6. As the time of his death approached: "It is finished."
7. As he died: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

Last words matter, and they often say a great deal about how a person lives. On this first Sunday of Lent, we begin a series in which we’ll look at each of the last seven ‘words’ of Christ. They are 7 statements of different sorts taken from the four gospels, each of which reports the events of Jesus’ death from their own distinct angle. (I want to acknowledge: it’s not good practice to try to weave the four narratives into one; it’s better to hear each author’s story on its own terms. But these 7 statements of Jesus taken together have been the focus of study and devotion and creative inspiration for centuries, because they are a glimpse deep into who Jesus was.)

Throughout Lent, as we walk through the series, we’ll have to work to remember that all seven words were spoken from the cross. Forty days is a long time to spend at the foot of
the cross; after all, these words were actually spoken over a few hours, not six weeks. But Paul wrote to the Corinthians,¹ "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified," reminding us that to know the risen Christ, we must know the crucified Christ. Most of us like to hurry to Easter, spending as little time at the cross as possible. We'll spend this Lent with Jesus in his last hours, listening carefully to how he died, with an ear to how we might live.

The first word: Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. Jesus has come to Jerusalem, knowing that the religious and Roman authorities have been looking for their chance to get rid of him. They arrested him and held a joke of a trial. He has been mocked and beaten, and the crowd who cheered his arrival turned against him. He has been sentenced to die in the first century version of the electric chair, and as he's being strapped in—that is, nailed to the cross—he speaks these words: "Father, forgive them; they don't know what they're doing."

**This is Jesus living his own words.** Flash back to the Sermon on the Mount, that beautiful scene with Jesus teaching the people God’s peaceful ways. That day, it was all good news. It all sounded so lovely. So peaceful. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. His face was glowing with the joy of these deep truths about how things work in God’s world. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. In the peace and joy of that afternoon on the hillside it was hard to process the depth of what he was saying. Only later did it settle in that he was talking about being blessed in the midst of being targeted and abused. You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..."

Then the memory fades, and we’re back in the awful present. What seemed so happy then is an unbelievable challenge now. **Sure that stuff sounded good in a mountain meadow, but is it realistic in the midst of an unjust execution?**

Crucifixion was a punishment so horrible that it reduced folks to cursing the day they were born, hurling anger and curses for hours straight. Sometimes the Roman guards would remove the tongues of crucifixion victims so they didn’t have to hear the screaming hatred. But Jesus was the one who had called his followers to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors, and that’s what he did when his time came. What we see here is the meaning of integrity: this man's words and actions and thoughts all align perfectly. Who he is in the midst of his greatest nightmare, the victim of unspeakable unfairness, face-to-face with evil incarnate, is perfectly aligned with who he was on the mountain as he taught the people about how the kingdom of God works.

¹ 1 Corinthians 2:1-2
The first word of Jesus from the cross was a man of integrity dying as he lived. But it was also more than that. In this moment, we see the breadth and depth of God's forgiveness. Jesus had taught about it over and over with stories like the Prodigal Son. He had offered forgiveness over and over to those he healed and those he called to follow him. Now he was announcing it, not just for his executioners, not just for his accusers or those who sought political gain by silencing him, not just for the religious leaders who were committing evil in God's name, not just for the crowd that had turned on him in a day. He was announcing forgiveness for all of humanity throughout time. This is God speaking the deepest compassion the world has ever known in the midst of humanity calling for the death penalty for God the Creator of Life. While humanity renders its verdict of guilty for God, God renders God's verdict for humanity: "Forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." This is God having compassion for stupid humanity tragically, blindly declaring itself god. The Garden of Eden story makes it clear that from the very beginning humanity has sought to become our own gods, wanting all the control. Making our own gods, like the golden calf. Trying to secure ourselves with extra manna and empires and enslaving brother and sister human beings and atomic weapons. Blindly destroying the earth in the name of short-term comfort and profit. Resisting our real vulnerability in every way we can, just like Adam & Eve, who made clothes to cover up and protect themselves once they were aware of their vulnerability (even though that vulnerability is the substance of humanity's intimacy with God). Forgive them, for they know not what they do. That's compassion. That's love. Catholic priest and writer Richard Neuhaus said, "This is what it means to love; this is what it means to be love; this is what it means to say that God is love. ... Love is the justice of the God who is love."²

So the first word of Jesus from the cross was a man of integrity practicing what he preached. And he was demonstrating the breadth and depth of God's forgiveness. But it was even more than that. Jesus was birthing God's kingdom, because his example is repeated throughout every generation in ways that are part of bringing about the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. We see an early example in Acts, when Stephen, one of Jesus' early followers, was being stoned for preaching the truth and angering the powers-that-were. His last words make it clear he learned from Jesus how to die: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." [Acts 7:54-60] Among those for whom Stephen prayed for mercy was a man named Saul, chief among the crusaders against those whom he thought of as blasphemers. Saul then experienced powerful forgiveness when a Jesus-follower named Ananias took him in and offered him God's mercy; Saul became Paul, the apostle of the gospel to the Gentiles. It was a chain of love and forgiveness that began at the cross and radiated outward through time and space.

Since this word came as Jesus was dying, he showed us that **following the Way of God means loving our enemies rather than defeating them.** Jesus's way is costly. It isn't fair. It is painful. **And** it is life-giving. These days we see this principle at work in non-violent change movements, when whole communities of people refuse to respond to violence with violence. Did you see the movie *Invictus*? It’s the story of Nelson Mandela’s leadership in South Africa after the fall of the racist Apartheid system. Blacks, who had been violently oppressed by the whites for decades, were finally in power and faced a choice about how they would rule. Fairness would dictate that they lord their power over the white minority like the whites had over them for so long. But Mandela led them in a different direction. The Rev. Peter Storey describes the situation this way:

…the millions of black people who suffered horrific indignities under the awful policy of apartheid have made forgiving their enemies the key to rebuilding their nation. They have put aside their primitive right to revenge and embraced something more costly yet much more hopeful. Over twenty thousand cases of torture, assassination, maiming, and other gross human rights violations were heard by South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and some 7000 perpetrators of these abuses appeared to ask for forgiveness. Not a single case of private retribution has been recorded.³

**Jesus showed humanity the way of life as he died, beginning with forgiveness for our enemies.** What does 'love your enemies' mean to us, here, in Indianapolis? What does 'pray for those who persecute you' mean for you in your life? What does Jesus’ example of inexhaustible compassion for the very one who is hurting me mean for you at home? How might we live "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" here in Indiana?

Let’s close with a sung prayer, #390, Forgive Our Sins as We Forgive. Listen to the last verse we’ll sing: *Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls, and bid resentment cease; then, bound to all in bonds of love, our lives will spread your peace.*

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