

We begin a new sermon series called *Seven Last Words* as we begin our journey to the cross during Lent. Next Sunday, is the official first Sunday of Lent, but since there are seven sayings, we need seven weeks. In this sermon series, we will be exploring the Seven Last Sayings that Jesus said while he was on the cross just before his death. To give you a glimpse of what we'll be exploring, here are the statements:

- ⊕ “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”
- ⊕ “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”
- ⊕ “Dear woman, here is your son, here is your mother” when speaking to John and Mary.
- ⊕ “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
- ⊕ “I am thirsty.”
- ⊕ “It is finished.”
- ⊕ “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

We will also focus on one word in each of these sayings to see how we can better understand why Jesus said these statements, just before death. I would think his “famous last words” would be pretty important. The last words that he leaves to his beloveds.

Let's dig in with the first saying, “Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing” (v.34). The infamous “they.” Who is Jesus talking about? This scripture tells us there are a lot of “theys” there as this takes place. There is a large crowd who walk with Jesus to the cross to witness his crucifixion. Some are women who are publicly showing their grief. There were two criminals who would be put to death beside Jesus. The people stood by and watched; they gambled for his clothes; the

leaders scoffed at him; the soldiers mocked him.

Perhaps Jesus is talking about the Jewish leaders who trumped up charges against him and the Romans who beat him, sentenced him, and nailed him to the cross. Perhaps Jesus is thinking in bigger terms. Perhaps he is talking about all of us who have participated in this story. We have stood by and watched, we have scoffed and mocked at times, and our sins have nailed him to the cross.

Let's recap on what preceded this saying. The evening before, he was betrayed by one of his own disciples for money, he was arrested, interrogated, tried with falsified evidence, and sentenced to death. Peter denied him three times even though he said he would never deny him. He was beaten and whipped, forced to carry his own cross to his execution, stripped, and nailed to the cross. The first thing he says after all of this is “Father, forgive them.” He prays for his enemies. He lived and died by the words he preached, to love our enemies.

We see again the importance of forgiveness even for those who hurt us. How do we forgive those who have done such heinous crimes as this? Jesus showed us how. Begin with prayer. Pray for them. Pray that God will change their heart. Pray that God will change your heart. Pray for wisdom. Jesus said, “They don't know what they are doing.” He had the wisdom that they really didn't know the effect their actions would have.

Did the Jewish leaders really know they were killing the Son of God? They thought they were being faithful servants. In their minds, Jesus was a blasphemer because

he claimed to be one with God. They thought they were doing the right thing.

Did the people who voted to send Jesus to the cross and release Barabbas really know that they were choosing a notorious criminal over the innocent? Sometimes we think our choices are the best at the time, but we really don't know the long-term effects that will come from them. Sometimes we think we're doing something good, but we don't really know the harm we are causing others. Sometimes people don't know the harm they are causing us.

Other times, they know full well. They intend to harm us or don't care if we are harmed. And, sometimes we know full well what we do may cause harm, but we do it anyway. There are so many times that we know the right thing to do, but we don't do it. There are so many times that we know the wrong thing to do, and we do it anyway. We sin against God over and over, yet, hear the good news: Jesus forgives us because he loves us. This is the kind of love that is needed to forgive our enemies. We can't do it on our own. We have to have Jesus' love to forgive those who harm us. And, sometimes it takes time for us to grasp that and turn it over to Jesus.

What do you know? I know that whenever we get caught up into something that we don't fully understand the implications, or when we know exactly what we're doing, Jesus forgives us. He sees us. We are his Beloved. He knows our hearts and situations. He loves us anyway. And, we are to express that same kind of love and forgiveness with one another. Because we have Jesus, we are capable of forgiving our enemies.

This past week at General Conference, I believe that some well-intentioned people thought they were doing the right thing. They didn't really know that their words and actions would harm people. I really don't think they knew the long-term implications. I also believe that there were some who knew full-well what they were doing in order to prove that they are right and others are wrong. In my experience, The United Methodist Church was always a place where people with differing opinions could still be united in Christ's love.

The Church that I saw at General Conference was reminiscent of the church I was raised in, the church that broke me. I expressed my grief on Facebook this week, and a childhood friend reached out to me, and said, "I'm curious to know if the church that broke you is the same one that broke me." She shared that she gets physically ill if she has to go back into that church, for a funeral or wedding. I remember the harm she experienced by the church members thirty years ago. She said she has never been able to go to any church since then and she doesn't think she ever will.

We don't know the long-term harm that was caused this week, whether intentional or not. Because we're part of a global church with 12 million members, we may feel that there's not much we can do. One thing we can do is to continue loving God and others right here in this local church and in this community. We can love each other and not cause each other harm with our words and actions despite our differing opinions and Biblical interpretations. Jesus sees each of us and loves us and forgives us, so we should do the same with each other.