

## Christ the Forgiving

(Luke 23:33-43)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia  
Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, November 24, 2019

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our creator, our sustainer and our redeemer. Amen.

It's a jarring moment to discover that on this last Sunday after Pentecost, a day referred to alternately as "Christ the King Sunday" or "Reign of Christ Sunday," our Gospel reading isn't about giving praise and thanks to an eternal, heavenly ruler seated on a throne. It's not a moment of glory, or of celebration. It's certainly not the instant of an incredible miracle.

No, instead we are compelled to look upon the beaten, scourged, bloodied and humiliated Son of God hanging on a cross. The life of one that was spent extending compassion ... healing the sick ... offering hope to the poor ... sharing the promise of God's grace ... now draws to a close in one of the cruelest, most unimaginable ways possible. The child whose birth was once heralded by a heavenly host is now the man whose death is heralded by jeering soldiers, scoffing religious leaders, and derisive comments of another – condemned alongside him.

For me, one of the things that is truly remarkable about the moments shared in this passage is that even in the midst of his own suffering ... even in those final agonizing minutes of his life on that tragic day ... the words he spoke were out of a ***concern for others***. He was dying, yes, and at that point in time no one appeared to know what the future held. But what he spoke were words to ensure that very future – not his own, but that of others.

They were words of ***hope***. They were words of ***salvation***. In responding to one of the condemned men hanging next to him, "Jesus' last words to another human being before his death and resurrection were words of forgiveness."<sup>1</sup>

The act of forgiveness is challenging. It's admittedly difficult sometimes – perhaps even ***many more often than not*** – for us to be merciful and forgiving of others. Perhaps sometimes the difficulty in extending forgiveness even extends to the forgiveness we may feel we need to give to ourselves. Nancy Westfield has written that when it comes to forgiveness, "Part of our inability to believe and trust the forgiving power of God's grace and mercy is our inability to believe that other people deserve mercy. ***We*** want to judge whom God lets into heaven."<sup>2</sup>

It is ***not*** our place to judge those whom we feel God should let into heaven. It ***is*** our place to forgive ... and to forgive ... and to forgive. Forgiveness is not a one-time event; forgiveness is an

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Lynn Westfield, "Luke 23:33-43: Pastoral Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 4*, p. 332.

<sup>2</sup> Westfield, p. 334.

action that we must do over and over. As Jesus tells Peter in Matthew's Gospel, we shouldn't forgive seven times; we should forgive "seventy-seven times."<sup>3</sup>

Even if we have been so hurt ... even if we're so offended or angered ... by someone else that we simply don't feel we can or should forgive, shouldn't we at the very least expect of ourselves that which we ask from God? Remember the words of the Confession in the traditional language of the Eucharist: "Have mercy upon us, have mercy upon us, most merciful Father; for thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ's sake, forgive us all that is past."<sup>4</sup> If we are to live our lives in the way **Christ** asks, shouldn't we also **offer** that for which **we ask**?

As I've said several times in the past, walking the way of Christ isn't easy. We're called to do difficult things ... the difficult things of which Jesus often spoke and which his first disciples tried and struggled to accomplish. But try we must – and we must **always** strive to look at the world and our role in it through the eyes of Christ ... to shape it as his hands and feet. We must try to find where God is actively and authentically at work in the world – and as we do it, we must understand that what God may want from us and our community may **not** be what **we** want.

There may be disagreement and a reason to protest the call we feel. You only need read through the Scriptures to find where the patriarchs and matriarchs ... those who shaped our faith and our religion ... sometimes disagreed with God, or argued with God, or even fled from God. The danger is to be found if there is never disagreement with God ... if what **you** want **never** differs from what you think **God wants** ... if God speaks, but speaks with **your voice**. As Timothy Kelleher, the founder and pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, wrote, "If your god never disagrees with you, you might just be worshiping an idealized version of yourself."<sup>5</sup>

And here I return to forgiveness. If we've been wronged and yet still feel led to avoid forgiving, the voice that stops us isn't God's; it's ours. If there is a gulf that has developed between us and a friend or family member or coworker and still we don't feel called to bridge that gulf or heal that divide, the voice that stops us isn't God's; it's ours. If Jesus can speak words of forgiveness even as he is dying on a cross, can't we do the same as we live through the difficulties of life – the anger ... the resentment ... the bitterness? If Jesus can forgive in the midst of his own humiliation, can't we do the same in our own moments of humiliation ... or arrogance ... or pride?

So on this Christ the King Sunday, perhaps we're not called to worship Christ **as** King but rather to worship the **suffering Christ** who set aside his suffering **to forgive**. Perhaps we're called not to honor the **Reign** of Christ but rather honor the **words** of Christ ... the **actions** of Christ ... the **example** of Christ.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 18:21-22 (NRSV).

<sup>4</sup> "Confession of Sin," from *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 331.

<sup>5</sup> <https://sermonquotes.com/sermonquotes/553-if-your-god-never-disagrees.html>

We can always live as ones who are forgiven ... who have been forgiven ... who forever will be forgiven. The challenge is to be the one who forgives, from wherever we are in life ... from whatever we are feeling in life. Jesus asks us to pick up our cross and follow him; may we be agents of forgiveness not **despite** the cross, but **because** of the cross.