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Tangled: "Father, Forgive Them"

Luke 23:34 Then Jesus said, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do".

A friend of mine, who travels quite a bit, tells the following story¹; it's the story of one those minor mysteries of life. Here's what he has to say:

In preparing for a trip, I put my laptop in its carrying case. In another small pocket, I put the electric connection cord, the [ethernet] cord and the mouse and its cord. I wrap each one separately. I do take the laptop out to go through security at the airport, but the cords are never touched. The computer case goes into the overhead compartment or under my seat. No one else ever touches it. Hours later, my flight has arrived, I have ...checked into the hotel and I plan to work on my laptop. I take the laptop out and then unzip the small pocket with the three cords.... The three cords are now... tangled up with one another! It takes me several minutes to untangled them. How did that happen?

I can't answer his question, can you? It's one of those small mysteries of life like socks that start out in pairs at the beginning of their laundry journey but have mysteriously become divorced by the end, like the fact that your car keys are never where you think you left them but have always quietly wandered somewhere else.

But that minor mystery of the spontaneously tangling computer cords is a simile sometimes, my friend goes on to say, for life itself:

...isn't this the way life goes far too often? It seems we have things pretty well

¹Ben Bohren, "CCNC-N Weekly E-news 3-28-07"
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ccncn-church-members-and-friends/message/332>

organized...in hand...under control...and all of a sudden out of nowhere, all kinds of things are tangled up! We have no real idea how it happened, but things have gotten out of control: ...messy...confused...complicated. ... [H]ealth concern[s] come... out of nowhere or a relationship suddenly sours or... a pipe breaks or... we get a call from the teacher that our kid's grades are slipping or there are just too many deadlines and not enough hours.... You know what I mean?

Well, yes I do. And I'll bet you do too. We also know that Jesus Himself also knew that experience of "tangledness," of complexity, of the mixed-up-ed-ness of life and death, praise and jeers, accolade and acrimony. In the space of a few days, he experienced such tangledness on that week so long ago. His disciples experienced the same thing. Palm Sunday saw them riding high; how could life be better than this? By Thursday evening it had all gotten tangled up in fear and betrayal. But the tanglings got worse. Friday – where we find ourselves today – finds their good and gentle Jesus beaten, mocked, put on trial before the Romans, and nailed to a cross. From adulation to awfulness, from acclaim to odiousness. They must have thought: how did that happen; life had seemed to be going so well! How tangled indeed.

Tangledness. Oh what an apt image indeed for this day of poignancy and pathos. And Jesus himself adds to our sense of "tangledness" by the first of those last words of his earthly life: *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."*

Forgiveness. Such a powerful, strange, mysterious, sometimes misused word. Forgiveness. It's not a concept, not an action, that comes easily to us human beings. And sometimes we very readily get it confused with other things. Sometimes we disguise self-righteousness in the garb of faux forgiveness. Sometimes we even use forgiveness as a weapon to prolong the pain instead of move beyond it. Sometimes we confuse forgiving and forgetting and say morally dubious things to people who have

been abused by evil when we over-simplistically tell them to “forgive and forget.” Forgiveness. What might Jesus’ words from the cross, words on this most tangled of days concerning this most tangled of human emotions and actions, have to teach us. Let me suggest three things.

First, notice something. Jesus’ words here are a *prayer*. They are addressed to God. They are not smarmy or self-righteous words directed to someone else; they are a plea to God. And, perhaps even more importantly, they remind us of something about prayer that we should always remember; in the poignant and powerful words of Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, *“God does not need our prayers. We need them. We need to be able to pray in sincerity and beauty. And the prayer should not be against somebody but always for somebody.”* ***The prayer should not be against somebody, but always for somebody.*** Does that line convict you? It does me. For sometimes I have used my prayers as weapons; have you? Sometimes I have had people’s prayers used as weapons against me. At a church where I once the pastor, a church full of good people who somehow seemed to find themselves enmeshed in perennial conflict, one of the Elders once opened a “prayer meeting” with the line *“Now let us begin our prayers by asking that our pastor would recant and repent of his wrong beliefs.”* In my own denomination, twenty years ago, when we were electing a General Minister and President, during the tension-filled debate one gentleman came to the microphone and invited everyone to pray the Lord’s Prayer together and to “aim” that prayer at the heart of the nominee in the hopes of having him, too, repent of his “wrongful” beliefs.

But, as Wiesel reminds us, prayer that is used as a weapon is not prayer, it’s presumption. Prayer that is offered to let God know whom He needs to especially chastise, as if God is unaware of the foibles and failings of all His children, is not prayer, it’s pretentious. Prayer that is offered in the belief that one is morally superior to

the “object” of one’s prayers is not prayer, it’s smug self-satisfaction. How do we avoid these things, though, sinful and earthly creatures that we are?

Well, I think an answer to that may lead us to a second characteristic of prayer that these opening words of the last few hours of Jesus’ earthly life remind us of: prayer ought always have the character of confession. A wise seminary professor of mine once said that in every story from the Bible we always inescapably and often unconsciously put ourselves in the role of one of the characters of the story. And, I don’t know about you, but I have to confess that I sometimes put myself in the magnanimous role of God, deigning to forgive those who “need” my dispensation. Ouch. We are all prone to it. “Father, forgive them.” **Them**. Just as in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, where Jesus tells of the one-hour workers who received the exact same pay as those who worked all day long, and where we too often unconsciously assume ourselves to be one of those workers who labored all day, maybe it would be more honest and more authentic for us to remember that often it is **we** who are “them”! It is **we** who stand in need of forgiveness, not some sort of “they” or “them” whom we think of ourselves as somehow superior to. It is **we** who are often the one-hour-workers and God through Christ miraculously loves us just as lavishly as those who truly labored all the day long. “Father, forgive them.” Jesus’ words convict me and remind me that often “them” is me!

Third, it is utterly crucial for each one of us and for the Church Universal never, ever to use Jesus’ words about forgiving “them” as any sort of license for anti-Judaism, for any sort of discrimination or bias or disdain for our Jewish brothers and sisters. For that would in fact be **blasphemy**. The “them” that Jesus is speaking of here is not, as too much of the Church has sometimes said, “the Jews.” “The Jews” did not kill Jesus;

Roman Imperial power did. To maintain otherwise is to commit the sin of fundamental ingratitude to the people and the history that you and I, as St. Paul says, have been graciously “grafted onto.” Our Lord Jesus was born a Jew, was raised as a faithful Jewish boy, gave thanks in the Temple and synagogue for the glorious gift of the Law, and went to his death as a beloved son of the Torah. Thanks be to God for that. For if God had decided to revoke His gift of grace to the people whom He chose, then there is no reason whatsoever that such a capricious God could not choose to revoke the same divine love from you and me. But God did not and does not do that. The death of Jesus was finally due to the power of Rome which did not deal lightly with disturbers of the imperial peace and order. But to say things like “the Jews killed Jesus” and that Jesus’ words from the cross are aimed at “the Jews” is to end up helping to license that unspeakably awful history, the worst sin of the Church Universal, of Christianity’s persecution of the people to whom it should have the most gratitude!

Sometimes, this view that Jesus is speaking of “the Jews” here is joined with the view that says that Good Friday is about God demanding a bloody sacrifice of His own son in order to make up for the sins of humanity. Putting aside the fact that such a view didn’t enter Christian history for another thousand years, *we ought never forget that we should never say anything about God that we wouldn’t say about a loving human parent.* If a human parent demanded the death of his or her child in order to appease the parent’s anger, we’d not call that holy – we’d call it monstrous! Good Friday is not about God being satisfied only by some sort of bloody sacrifice of His own child; no, it is about the depths and depravity to which human beings can sink to – to the point of which that they can kill the very incarnation of God’s unconditional love. Good Friday is not about God’s honor, it is about the depth of humanity’s dishonor.

What a tangled thing, indeed, this day is, what a tangled thing indeed is this

whole idea of forgiveness. So what do we do on this day? What does Jesus teach us even in the last hours of his earthly life? A wise person once said that not forgiving is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. That's right, isn't it? For the resentments that we bear, the unwillingness to forgive that we sometimes burnish like a badge of honor, can indeed eat us up from the inside out. Now, forgiving is never forgetting; that is impossible and even if it were possible, it would often be unwise. To forgive is not to put yourself in a position to be hurt again and again, but it is to say that you will not give the power to determine who you shall be and your attitude toward life over to anyone else but God. Notice, I *didn't* say give it over to yourself. Because if life teaches us anything it is that we need something, someone, some power larger, stronger, and more perfect than ourselves to show us the way, to offer us our purpose, to guide us and uphold us and challenge us and strengthen us. Jesus, even in the last hours of his life, decided that he would not give such power over to those who despised, hurt, and tortured him but would yet follow the God who gave Him life, and whose power and unconditional love might be mocked on this day but which would ultimately and wonderfully and always triumph. It's the same choice that you and I can make on this and every day. And for that very Good News, even on this tangled day, thanks be to God. Amen.