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Date: Good Friday - March 29, 2013
Sermon Title: "Forgive Them, For They Know Not ..."
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It's Good Friday, and Jesus says from the cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." That may be the single most astounding statement in the entire Bible. I don't wish to be crass or insensitive. I'm actually a very squeamish guy myself, but there's a reality here that we need to picture.

Remember, Jesus isn't forgiving his executioner and tormenters before his brutal murder in some sort of spiritual holier-than-thou braggadocio. And Jesus isn't forgiving the bad guys after it's all over, after the Resurrection, when everything is hunky dory, in some sort of triumphant, magnanimous euphoria.

Jesus says, "Father, forgive them," right smack in the middle of his own private hell, right during the horror, the pain, the agony of crucifixion.

Last week, I went up to Williamstown in the Berkshires to hide out for a few days and get ready for Holy Week. As further preparation, I visited two excellent museums, the Williams College Museum of Art and the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, especially for the great religious art.

One painting really struck me at The Clark. Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane on Maundy Thursday, on his knees, praying to God to get him out of the horror. And at that precise moment, Jesus is visited by three little cherubs, three tiny, cute, innocent angels., Each is carrying something for Jesus. One is presenting Jesus with the nails that will nail him to the cross. A second holds the crown of thorns that will be impaled on his head. The third is carrying the very cross he will be nailed to. The message of the cherubs was clear: Jesus was doomed.

And a few hours later, the bad guys would put those nails to use, and the crown of thorns and the cross, and they'd add to them the whips and the beatings and the spear; and they would use them all with relish, with

delight, with cruelty, with sneers and insults and just plain evil. And in the middle of all that, Jesus says, "Father, forgive them."

Do you see that? It is while Jesus can lash out at the crowd and see for himself that his friends have abandoned him, the crowds have forgotten him, all the people he helped and healed, they're home, hiding under their beds.

And Jesus says to the soldiers who pounded the nails; to Peter, who denied even knowing him; to Judas, who betrayed him; to Pontius Pilate; to Caiaphas, the High Priest; to all the coconspirators against him, all his executioners, "Father, forgive them."

This is so far beyond my comprehension! If you've read my book *My Habitat for Humanity*, you know I can hold a grudge. I can remember every detail of every slight. I can remember the umpire at Deerfield Academy who called me out on a third strike on a curve ball that was at least three feet off the plate. I can remember hitting my best friend in the third grade because he kissed a girl I liked. I can remember freshman year in college being cheated out of a good grade by a philosophy teacher, and I never took philosophy ever again. I remember everything about every person who ever did me wrong. So you can see, it is beyond me how Jesus could forgive all those who destroyed him right during the destruction, who forgave all the evildoers right while they were doing their evil!

And to top it all off, he says, "Father, forgive them ... for they know not what they do"! They don't know what they're doing? The person pounding the nails in, the person whipping him, the people mocking him, Judas betraying him with a kiss, Peter denying him ... three times? They didn't know what they were doing? Perhaps on some cosmic level where you and I don't live!

They, perhaps, did not realize that they were killing the Messiah, the Son of God. Perhaps they didn't know that he was on the cross paying for their sins. Perhaps in the grand scheme of things, they "knew not what they were doing." But on a personal, practical level, they darned well knew what they were up to. To kill Jesus took effort, planning, a lot of physical activity. Yet, despite all that evidence to the contrary, Jesus forgave them because, in his view of things, they didn't really know what they were doing. That is an extraordinary and generous act of mercy.

Of course, what Jesus was doing was overreaching. Jesus was always overreaching. He was always doing more than anyone else could imagine.

When Jesus fed 5,000 with only five loaves of bread and two little fishes, he was overreaching. When Jesus entrusted his life's work to a bunch of 12 uneducated country boys, he was overreaching. When he healed a hated Roman soldier's servant, he was overreaching. When he went into the Temple in Jerusalem and tried to clean it up and refocus their purpose, he was overreaching. When he told us to "forgive 70 times 7," or "love our enemies," that was way overreaching! Or when he said never be angry or insulting ... ever? Never lust? Never worry? Never be afraid? Never give up on somebody? Ever? Overreaching, overreaching, overreaching.

And the biggest overreach of all: "Be ye perfect." That is the Jesus of Nazareth who speaks from the cross and says something that no other religion, no other hero or saint or prophet could ever imagine.

"Father, forgive them, all of them, each one of them, the nice ones and the not-so-nice ones. The sorry ones and the not-yet-sorry ones, the arrogant, mean ones who seem to be enjoying this, and the humble, quiet ones who are ashamed ... but still silent. Forgive all of them, for they just can't grasp, they just can't comprehend, they just can't imagine anyone loving them so much that someone would do what I am doing just for them."

For me, that's the POWER of Good Friday. Not the death, but the love.

People always ask why the cross in our church is empty, there's no body on it. It's not a crucifix. Many churches do have the crucifix, Jesus on the cross. One is not right and the other wrong. They are both equally true, equally powerful. But the emphasis is different.

For us, the emphasis is on God's love, triumphant, victorious. The act itself is loving. As Jesus put it himself, "No greater love has anyone than to lay down your life for others." And Jesus did it, Jesus "walked the talk."

That is expressed so powerfully in the great hymn "How Great Thou Art." If you were in church for Palm Sunday, you'll remember that Alida concluded the service with that hymn, and she had us end with the third verse that explains it all:

*And when I think that God his son not sparing,
Sent him to die - I scarce can take it in,
That on the cross my burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died to take away my sin:*

*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!*