

As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?" Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 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. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

**Introduction.** If you were to take an old Bible and cut out the portions in the gospels that related to the crucifixion of Jesus, you would find that while all four share some commonalities, each is unique. Each of the evangels told the story from their own perspective and gave the execution event a particular twist in order to share something

of the nature and ministry of Christ. These differences do not take away from the story or serve as some type of contradictory evidence that challenges the validity of the episode but paint a fuller picture of Jesus and his mission.

In his version, Luke chose to share some things that the other gospel writers did not include. Of particular interest is the fact that he shared Jesus' interaction with three different parties during the crucifixion event. None of the other gospels include the details of these encounters.

For Luke, who highlights Jesus' ministry of seeking and saving the poor and the outcasts, his dealing with people even in the context of the cross is vital. Luke is less concerned about the details of the crucifixion – how, when, where. Rather he is more focused on Jesus' ministry to people, even in his darkest hour. This morning, I invite you to join me in looking at these encounters. What were Jesus' "cross-words" to those persons? What do his words mean for us and our world?

**"Followers."** According to Luke, a large group of people *followed* Jesus as he was being led away to the place of crucifixion. For the casual reader, following seems to indicate an act of going along after someone. Say after church, you have invited Patty and me to lunch. You suggest a restaurant that is unfamiliar to us. You say to us, "Follow us." That will be an act to get to that location. It is obvious this is the initial meaning here.

But the word "follow" is an important word to Jesus. It is the word he uses to invite people to be his disciples – "Follow me" (Luke 5:27). To be a disciple, one must follow Jesus.

Luke communicates in a subtle way that these who are "following" Jesus have a connection with him. They are not the people who had screamed, "Crucify him." Rather they are those who are "followers" at some level. Their actions indicate they have a real affection for Jesus. They are grieving Jesus' suffering and impending death.

Apparently most of the followers are women. As he addresses them he says, "Daughters of Jerusalem." Here is a group, mainly women who are still following Jesus

even though his death is near. These are loyal people. Although the 12 have scattered (except for John), these women are hanging in there with Jesus.

Jesus' message to them is two-fold. "Do not weep for me but weep for you and your children."

You may have heard about the man who was fishing with a buddy near a bridge when a long funeral procession passed by. Upon seeing the cars, the man rose to his feet, faced the procession, took off his hat and placed it over his heart. After it had passed, his buddy said, "John, I did not know you were a sentimental type." The man responded, "It was the least I could do. I was married to that woman for 45 years."

Jesus urged these followers not to weep for him. He did not want them to mourn his death. While we can speculate on why he pronounced this prohibition, I suspect there was an element of hope underlying his words. Jesus knew there was something beyond the cross for him. While death would be sure and certain, God held power over death. Perhaps he was foreshadowing Easter. (In the gloom of Lent, we must always remember we are Easter people.) Jesus called the people who followed not to weep for him but for themselves and their children. He then spoke of tough days of suffering ahead.

Earlier in the gospel, Jesus had forewarned of destruction coming upon Jerusalem (19:41-44). In 70 AD, Roman forces descended upon Jerusalem and destroyed the city. Caesar ordered the city to be razed to the ground. The siege and destruction were severe. Even those followers of Christ who lived in the city at that time suffered under this great attack. Jesus painted this as a coming act of judgment.

Part of this story teaches us that even though we are faithful to Christ, we generally face suffering when our community and world suffer around us. In the present economic crisis, many of our nation's most godly saints who depend upon investments for their livelihood have seen them shrink 50-60%. Godly people have lost their jobs. Churches have had to scale back on ministries. Some believers face foreclosure of their homes. We suffer

when others encounter the consequences of their behaviors.

There is another level of this for Christ's followers. Jesus from time to time had spoken that his followers would face persecution. Listen to these words spoken by Jesus: *"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man (Luke 6:22).* In the Book of Acts, we can read of believers being persecuted for their faith in Christ. Down through the ages, even through our present time we see this.

These words of Jesus in this first encounter shift the concerns of Jesus from his own suffering to those of his followers. It serves as a warning shot over the bow of our ship. Yet, there is an underlying message of hope that is more clearly stated in the encounters that follow.

*"Forgive them."* Perhaps the most quoted "cross-words" are at the center of the next encounter. After Jesus is hanging on the cross, he says, "Forgive them." These are powerful words.

A huge question arises for any who study this text: "For whom is Jesus interceding?" Unfortunately, the original writings were not ordered by punctuation and paragraphs. So it is difficult to tell for whom Jesus sought pardon. Luke had just spoken of the two criminals being executed with Jesus. Then we have the prayer from Jesus. Then Luke shares about the soldiers at the cross, people who pass by and the religious leaders who ridicule him. From the context, it could be either group or perhaps it was all inclusive. (My personal prejudice is that it was an all inclusive request.)

Forgiving others was central to Jesus' message. He was one who offered and pronounced forgiveness – of the woman who washed his feet with her tears, he said, "I tell you, her sins which were many have been forgiven" (7:47). He also called on his followers to forgive: *Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive" (17:3-4).*

A few weeks ago, "60 Minutes" aired an article that touched my heart. On July 28, 1984, a 22 year-old student, Jennifer Thompson was raped. Her eye witness

testimony served to convict a young black man named Ronald Cotton. Eleven years after the conviction, DNA testing proved Cotton had not assaulted her. After he was released from prison, Jennifer felt terrible that her eye witness testimony led to Cotton's eleven year incarceration. To get past what she was feeling, she knew she must face him. She arranged to meet him at a local church. Listen to her words:

'Ron, if I spent every second of every minute of every hour for the rest of my life telling you how sorry I am, it wouldn't come close to how my heart feels. I'm so sorry.' And Ronald just leaned down, he took my hands...and he looked at me, he said, 'I forgive you.'" Today, they and their families are good friends who spend time together. (.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/03/06/60minutes/main4848039\_page3.shtml)

Jesus' act of forgiveness set for each of us the supreme example for us. But even a greater thing is the expression of his great love for the guilty and the intention to forgive. His death becomes the great act of intercession for all sinners.

**Between criminals.** The final interaction took place between Jesus and the two criminals who were being executed at the same place as Jesus. Luke, nor any of the other gospel writers, tells their readers why these men were being executed. We are left to assume they were guilty of some capital crime.

One of the criminals joined in the taunting of Jesus by saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us." The other criminal rebuked him and said that the two of them deserved what they were getting but Jesus had done no wrong. He acknowledged his own transgressions and affirmed Jesus' innocence.

Then he turned to Jesus with a request: "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." How much this man understood about "Christ's kingdom" is questionable. He probably was not a religious man with a grasp of the scripture or even Jewish tradition. He may have never heard Jesus teach. Despite this, his words were a statement of faith in Jesus.

Jesus' response was an affirmation: "Today you will be with me in Paradise." Jesus not only promised to remember him but that the man would be with him.

Through the years many have taken this verse to be a means of building a theology of "heaven." While it conveys ideas worthy

of consideration and provides a measure of understanding, what is pertinent to our theme is Jesus' interaction with and acceptance of this man. Not only is forgiveness offered, he will be in Christ's presence after his death.

Once again we see the profound grace of God displayed of forgiving and accepting one who is sinful and guilty. The man's confession and call for mercy are heard by the Lord. Christ responds to his plea. Even in Christ's darkest hour, he gives mercy to the sinner.

**So what.** So what do we take away from these "cross-words" of Jesus? Luke demonstrates that Jesus came to seek and to save people. His attention was not focused on himself and his own agony but on others. His mission was people centered. Today, our Savior focuses on people.

In this story, Jesus interacts with his followers, with one who turns to him and with others who have rejected him. To all he shows mercy. To his followers, he speaks directly and prepares for what is ahead. Christ does not sugar coat the tough times ahead for us.

Toward those who are guilty and even reject him, Christ pleads for their forgiveness. Jesus did not merely come to gather the good religious people into his kingdom. He came to save sinners. He offers forgiveness to those guilty of the most vile transgressions.

Finally, Christ at all times responds to the repentant sinner who turns to him in faith. That person does not have to have a completely accurate theology or make amends for failures. He/she must turn to Christ.

**Invitation.** This morning, my hope is you have heard Jesus speaking to you where you are. I hope you can see him on the cross and understand his suffering was for our behalf. I pray you turn to him in faith.