

“Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”

Just who is Jesus forgiving from the cross? The two thieves on either side of him? Pilate, who condemned him to death? Peter, who denied him? Judas, who betrayed him? The Jewish leaders and the crowd, who called for his crucifixion? The disciples who deserted him? Throughout his Gospel, Luke has given us an orderly account of Jesus’ life: Jesus cared about the poor and the marginalized, he taught about the kingdom of God being available to the humble; he healed the sick and fed the hungry. And he was crucified. That short line of the story always seems too quickly said and passed over. “When they came to the place of the skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals.” And the story moves on. Today, let’s pause at the cross, and look at it straight on.

How is it possible that this man Jesus, the Son of God, ends up crucified? Seen as an enemy of the state, a common criminal, an object of derision, mockery and hate? Was this something God required for our salvation? I think not. Could it have been something that humanity required instead? Because we couldn’t accept a love this real? This man Jesus who taught the disciples and others in his life on earth what God was all about, about sacrificial love, about service to others, is unjustly killed. When Jesus was condemned to the cross, was it really a condemnation of Jesus or was it instead a condemnation of ourselves?

In Jesus’ giving his life for us, relinquishing his whole self, body and spirit, he accepted and absorbed all of the wretchedness humanity had to offer, the absolute worst of what we can do. While it is easy for us to recognize the evil in this story we have read, it’s not always so easy to see the darkness in our own hearts. Not comfortable to imagine us being the ones shouting “Crucify him!” “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” Might Jesus be forgiving not just those who were at the scene of the passion and crucifixion, but forgiving us, too, for our own destructive ways, both thoughts and actions? Our lies, our betrayals, our injustices toward others?

When Jesus prays, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do,” he is praying for you and me. And in so doing he is reminding us there is something beyond our own comprehension that Jesus knows about us. He knows our capacity for evil, both individually and collectively, yes, he knows what each of us can do that is far from the mark of God’s love. Jesus knows there is much to forgive that we may never even be aware of. But that’s not the whole picture.

Jesus also knows that his arms of love that are stretched out on the hard wood of the cross long to embrace the world God has created. God created us good and Jesus longs to bring us back to a place of wholeness, to reconcile us to the full, joyful, loving relationship he intends.

Yes, they crucified Jesus, a horrifying thing, an action that should indeed wound our hearts and grieve our spirits, that humanity is capable of such outrageous violence and destruction. Thank God, the story is not yet over. “Father, forgive us because we do not know what we are doing.”