

INI - SDG

Ash Wednesday
February 17, 2010
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church
Hecla, SD

Lenten Theme: THE PULPIT OF THE CROSS
- A Sermon on Forgiveness

Text: Luke 23:33-34 *And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." And they divided His garments and cast lots.*

Dear fellow sinners who have been redeemed, restored, and forgiven by Jesus precious blood. Grace and peace to you.

The pulpit - everyone who has ever gone to a church service knows what it is. Not everyone may know the proper name for it, but they know what it is for. The pulpit is the place the preacher goes to deliver his message for the day. Just about every church has a different looking pulpit. Most pulpits, like ours, are made of wood. Some newer pulpits are made of glass or beautifully sculpted metal.

But more important than what kind of pulpit a church has, is the message that comes from that pulpit. A church could have one of the most elaborate pulpits ever built, but if the Word of God is not preached rightly it is just an empty pulpit with an empty message. If the Gospel is not sounding forth from that pulpit, it just another piece of furniture. More important than the style of the pulpit is the message that is being delivered from that pulpit.

It is my prayer that during our Mid-Week Lenten services we will consider an entirely different pulpit. A style of pulpit that is unlike any to be found in our churches. A pulpit from which the most blessed sermons ever to be delivered can be heard. A pulpit which was made of wood. A pulpit to which the preacher was secured with nails. That pulpit is the cross of Jesus Christ. Let us therefore consider the pulpit of the cross from which our Savior Jesus delivered seven powerful sermons on Good Friday. We begin on this Ash Wednesday night with the first words of Jesus from the cross as He preached a sermon on forgiveness. We read from Luke 23:33-34 -

And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." And they divided His garments and cast lots.

This is the very Word of God, given to Luke by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. These words are God-breathed and as such we can rest our eternal hope firmly in them. That God would set us apart for His holy purposes through these words, even so we pray, "*Holy Father, sanctify us by Your truth, Your word is truth.*" Amen.

It doesn't take very long before a child learns the concept of fairness. And it is something that a child does not out grow. From youth to adulthood we are very much in-touch with the concept of fairness. It's not fair if my brother or sister gets more gifts at Christmas than I do. It's not fair if the teacher gives me a harder assignment than my other classmates. And how do you handle it when you feel you have been treated unfairly? Many times we feel justified in making things right. If you hit me, fairness requires that I hit you back. If you mistreat me, it is only fair that you expect to get the same treatment.

When you think about what is fair and what is not fair, think about Jesus. Do you think it was fair that Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane? Was it fair that He was falsely accused by the Jewish Sanhedrin? Was it fair that He had no one to defend Him while He was on trial? Was it fair that He was blindfolded, slapped, and spit upon? Was it fair that the Jewish council had already determined Jesus had to be killed before they questioned Him?

But the unfairness did not end there, did it? Since the Jewish council did not have the power to kill Jesus, they handed Him over to the Roman Government. And did Jesus receive a fair trial before Pontius Pilate? No! Pilate knew Jesus was innocent of anything deserving death and pronounced Him innocent no less than three times. Fairness would have required that Jesus be released. But what happened? He was mocked, whipped, beaten, spit upon, and a crown of thorns placed on His head. And then the most unfair thing this world has ever seen happened. Jesus, innocent Jesus, was given the death sentence.

And for what? What did Jesus ever do but expose the darkness of sin that was in the hearts of men? What did Jesus do to deserve a death sentence? Should Jesus have been put to death for giving sight to the blind or hearing to the deaf? For making the lame walk and the dead rise? If loving your neighbor was a crime, that would have been the only thing Jesus could have been pronounced guilty of. Yet Pilate gives the order that this Man whom he has pronounced innocent of anything deserving death, be crucified. A punishment that is reserved for only the most vile of criminals because of its horrific nature.

There on Calvary, a hill just outside the walls of Jerusalem, innocent Jesus has His healing hands and blessed feet nailed to a wooden cross. There His death sentence is carried out right alongside two condemned and guilty criminals. And no sooner was Jesus nailed to the cross than the Romans soldiers were eagerly dividing up His clothes. There at the foot of the cross, as the innocent Son of God hangs bleeding and dying, the greedy soldiers are gambling to get His last earthly possessions.

What happened to Jesus is the very definition of unfairness. And how do we handle unfairness? We make sure EVERYONE knows that what has happened to us is unfair. Think of how Jesus could have handled this unfair treatment. Earlier Jesus told Peter that He had more than 75,000 angels available at His beckon call. All He need do is say the word and they would enact revenge for the mistreatment of Jesus. Furthermore, remember who Jesus is. This is the same Jesus that walked on water and calmed the stormy seas, just by the power of His Word. The Son of God certainly had the power to destroy these enemies of Him for this unfair treatment. If you were Jesus what would have you done?

With all this as the background, listen to the first sermon Jesus delivered from the pulpit of the cross. ***“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they do.”*** Rather than crying to the heavens about His unfair treatment, Jesus prays for His enemies and preaches to us a sermon on forgiveness.

This isn't the first time Jesus preached such a sermon on forgiveness. Let's go back to about two years before Good Friday to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said, "***You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.***" (Matt 5:43-45) Rather than trying to get back at those who treat you unfairly, Jesus says to love them, bless them, do good to them, and even pray for them. Jesus says that is exactly how God the Father treats both the believer and unbeliever here on earth.

What makes the sermon Jesus delivered from the pulpit of the cross so amazing, is that He actually practiced what He preached. And He did so what it was most difficult. When His own person freedom was taken from Him. When His body was suffering in anguish. When His garments were stripped from Him and gambled away. At this moment Jesus preached a sermon about forgiveness.

What a glorious sermon this is that Jesus delivered in those most inhumane hours! And what a glorious sermon this is to the sinners ear! After all, who was Jesus praying for? The very ones who had put Him on the cross. He prays for forgiveness for those who had condemned Him, for those who had beaten Him, for those who had chosen freedom for Barabbas and called for His crucifixion, for those who had pounded nails into His hands and feet. Jesus prayed that the Father would forgive Jew and Gentile alike because they did not realize who it was they were crucifying. As the Great High Priest, Jesus was interceding for sinners.

Did any of those people deserve to be forgiven? Most certainly not! Jesus deserved a fair trial. He deserved witnesses to be called in His defense. While Jesus received a most unfair treatment, He loved His enemies and prayed that they be forgiven.

But this sermon of forgiveness is about more than just those Romans and Jews. It is also about each one of us. Each one of us played a roll in Jesus' crucifixion. Our sin, our disobedience, required satisfaction. The punishment for our sin had to be carried out and Jesus took it on Himself. If we had obeyed the commands of our Creator, the Son of God would have never had to die. Jesus was praying for our forgiveness as well. And God, for Jesus' sake, has forgiven us all our sins. Paul writes to the Ephesians, "***In (Jesus) we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.***" (Eph 1:7)

Jesus here is preaching with more than just words about forgiveness, He is showing us what forgiveness is. It is not just forgiving those little slip-ups that our loved ones make, but the big sins as well. Forgiving even when it is not earned or deserved. Did we deserve God's forgiveness? Did we deserve that the Lord of Glory should die for us? Jesus is preaching from the pulpit of the cross the very thing He taught us in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Forgive even our enemies. Forgive even when we have been treated unfair, even as God for Jesus' sake has forgiven each of us. Praise be to Jesus for His boundless love and forgiveness! Amen.