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A Stephen Ministry Congregation
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ASH WEDNESDAY

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“Father, Forgive Them”

(Luke 23:33-34)

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From a series written by Dr. David Peter

“And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Luke 23:33–34

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, You despise nothing You have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create in us new and contrite hearts that lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness we may receive from You full pardon and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Corrie Ten Boom was a Christian woman who was incarcerated during World War II in a Nazi concentration camp. She was imprisoned by the Nazis because her family tried to hide and protect Jewish people during the Holocaust. In other words, she was imprisoned for doing what was morally and ethically right. You may be familiar with her story from her book *The Hiding Place*.

Corrie's experience in the concentration camp was nothing short of horrific. She was put into forced labor and made to work for a pittance of spoiled food. The living conditions in the camp were atrocious and inhumane. Starvation and disease were rampant. She was subjected to all kinds of humiliation and degradation. The prison guards were awful. They mocked and used the prisoners for their own pleasure. Corrie and her sister Betsy were forced to pass through a delousing shower, while the male prison guards leered at them.

Thankfully, Corrie survived her imprisonment. Near the end of the war, the Allies liberated her concentration camp and she was set free. However, none of her family members survived.

After the war, Corrie Ten Boom became a popular speaker. She addressed Christian audiences relating her experiences and sharing how her faith gave her strength to persevere. During one tour, she focused on the need to forgive. She talked about forgiveness as the means to bring healing from the scars of war. After one speech in Munich, Germany a man approached her to greet her. He extended an outstretched hand to her and said, "Ja, Fraulein! It is

wonderful that Jesus forgives us all our sins, just as you say!” Corrie was about to shake his hand but stopped when she recognized the man. He was one of the guards who had abused her. She remembered his face as it was in the past—leering, lecherous, mocking. Her hand was now frozen in midair. She had lectured on forgiveness, but now stood face to face with a guard who had committed atrocities against her. Could she forgive this man? Could you forgive someone like him? (Lewis B. Smedes, “Forgiveness—The Power to Change the Past,” *Christianity Today*, Jan. 7, 1983, 26.)

Today is Ash Wednesday. It is the beginning of the season of Lent. Lent is a penitential season, meaning that it is a time for repentance and forgiveness. It is all about forgiveness. But it’s difficult to imagine forgiving someone who has so shamed and brutalized you. Even so, no one was more betrayed and brutalized than Jesus. He was rejected by his people. His own followers deserted him. One of his own disciples betrayed him. His friends denied having anything to do with him. He was tried in an illegal kangaroo court by religious clergy who then proceeded to pummel him with their fists. He became the target of a huge array of verbal abuse. He was taken to the Roman governor who declared he had done nothing worthy of punishment. Nonetheless, Pilate had him delivered over to be scourged and executed. The Roman soldiers mocked him by donning him in pretend royal garb. They pressed a crown of thorns upon his head and placed a reed in his hands as a scepter. Then they bowed before him and pretended to do homage to him, only to laugh and strike him with the reed. Even as he hung on the cross, the priests and the people reviled him.

More than that, Jesus was the target of intense physical abuse. If you have seen the movie *The Passion of the Christ*, I’m sure you still remember the graphic abuse. Jesus was beaten black and blue with fists and rods. His scourging involved the lacerations of a cat-o-nine-tails with pieces of sharp bone and metal embedded at the ends of the cords. This left ribbons of bloody skin and muscle on his back. His wrists and feet were fastened to the cross beams

with iron stakes. He hung naked bloodied and gasping for breath before the eyes of all who passed by.

In the midst of these atrocities and horrors, the words which proceeded from Jesus's mouth as he hung from that cross was a prayer. It was a prayer to his heavenly Father. It was a prayer for his persecutors. Simply, and graciously, Jesus prayed: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

How could he have said that? How could he ask for forgiveness for those who had so abused him? How could he forgive the likes of Judas who betrayed him, Peter who denied him, of Pilate who condemned, and the soldiers who had so brutalized him? How could he seek absolution for the priests who had instigated his arrest, for the crowds who turned against him, and for those who mocked him at the base of the cross? How could he do this?

He could do this because this is what he had come to do. This was the reason why he was born into the world. He had come to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). It was necessary that Christ suffer these things (Luke 24:26). It was necessary so that he might make atonement for sin, to pay the deadly punishment for the iniquities of all. It was necessary so that he might bring forgiveness to the world. Jesus himself declared the purpose behind it all: "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations" (Luke 24:46-47). It was all to bring forgiveness.

So from the cross, Jesus prays "Father, forgive them!" But who is "them?" Definitely "them" includes the religious priests and elders who instigated the arrest, the crowds who called for Jesus's crucifixion, the Roman governor and soldiers who carried out his execution. "Them" includes Judas the traitor, Peter the denier, and all the disciples who abandoned him in his hour of need. But more than that, "them" includes you! It includes me! "Them" is us, because we are complicit in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It is the sins of all humanity that sent Jesus to the cross. It is

our sins for which he came to die as well. It is our iniquities that Jesus bore on Calvary's tree. Every sinful thought you have ever had demands punishment. Every act of greed you have engaged in needs payment. Every selfish intention calls for a penalty. Your sins make you deserving of such suffering and death. But Jesus has come to be your substitute. He hangs on the cross for you! When he pleads "Father forgive them" he's pleading for you!

By his death on the cross he won that forgiveness. He pleaded for your forgiveness, but he also earned that forgiveness. Paul writes, "And you, who were dead in your trespasses . . . God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross" (Col. 2:13–14).

This forgiveness is for you! It's for the whole world— for all people of all time. Yet, not everyone will receive it. The reason is that not everybody wants it. For it is only through repentance that we receive God's forgiveness. It is only through acknowledging our sinfulness and being contrite for our sins that we receive the gift of forgiveness won by Jesus. There is no evidence that Caiaphas the high priest ever repented. It is unlikely that Pontius Pilate was ever contrite. Most of the Roman soldiers who carried out the crucifixion probably never acknowledged their grave transgression. Accordingly, they did not receive the forgiveness that Christ earned for them and offered them.

But some people did receive that forgiveness. The thief crucified next to Jesus confessed his guilt and was given the promise of paradise (Luke 23:40–43). Peter repented of his denials and was reinstated by Christ as an apostle (Luke 22:61–62, John 21:15–17). A crowd of 3000 who were identified as collaborating in Jesus's crucifixion, repented and were baptized on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:36–41). Acts 6:7 says even "a large number of priests became obedient to the faith" in Jesus as Savior. In each case, they repented of their sin and received the gracious gift of forgiveness.

Today is Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of Lent, a season of repentance. The church has set aside such a long season because the Bible teaches that only through repentance can we receive God's forgiveness. For instance, 1 John 1:8 says: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." So today, come before God in true repentance and receive his full forgiveness!

However, Christians not only receive forgiveness. We also give forgiveness. We offer absolution to those who have wronged us. The Spirit of Christ within us empowers us to forgive others, even as we have been forgiven.

Corrie Ten Boom stood face to face with her former captor. But now the situation had changed. The man in front of her was penitent, trusting in the grace of Jesus Christ. Yet Corrie's hand was frozen. She could not bring herself to reach out and take hold of the hand of one who had so shamed her. So she prayed. She didn't pray: "Father, forgive him." She prayed: "Lord, forgive me! Forgive me because I cannot forgive!" And as she prayed, she sensed anew God's forgiveness to her. Her arm relaxed, and she reached out and took hold of the hand of the former guard and she forgave him, because she had been forgiven (Smedes, 26).

Forgiveness is what this day is all about. Forgiveness is what Lent is all about. Forgiveness is what the cross is all about. Let forgiveness be what we are all about as well! Amen.

