
Father, Forgive Us

Luke 23:26-38

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 14, 2017,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

*Jesus loves the little children,
all the children of the world.
Red and yellow, black and white.
They are precious in his sight.
Jesus loves the little children of the world.*

At a recent meeting, a Duke Physics professor used an image that struck a chord with me. He spoke of crumbling mortar behind a gothic façade. And maybe the mortar of this Chapel isn't crumbling, literally anymore, thank God, but the world seems like it is. Crumbling, crushing, crashing, compressing those who live in it. Some may be uneasy with the darkness of this night and want to skip over it to bask in the light of Easter but let me remind everyone that we live the resurrection by carrying a cross. To bunny hop to Easter is like rushing to reconciliation while ignoring truth-telling and justice-making. Before you get to reconciliation, you have to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God. The truth is there is no Easter resurrection without a Good Friday crucifixion. There is death before there is life. You have to go through Good Friday to get to Easter Sunday.

The truth is that Good Friday is not just one day; maybe it is one solitary day on the liturgical calendar but on the existential human calendar for many people, every day is Good Friday. And that is the truth and nothing but the truth. That is my story and I'm sticking with it. For many, daylight is a 24/7 midnight, even for our children.

Jesus loves the little children of the world, but what about the rest of us? Do we truly love them? I'm thinking about children, not only because I once was one and am still here to talk about it, but Jesus, that holy lover of kids, mentions them as he's approaching his death. While he is on the cross, children are on his mind. "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children." Things may look bad for Jesus, but for them, things look worse, even suicidal. The days are surely coming "when they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem, "The Cry of the Children" is on point.

*"How long," they say, "how long, O cruel nation,
Will you stand, to move the world, on a child's heart, —
Stifle down with a mailed heel its palpitation,
And tread onward to your throne amid the mart?
Our blood splashes upward, O our tyrants,
And your purple shevs your path;
But the child's sob curseth deeper in the silence
Than the strong man in his wrath!"*

Can you hear the children sobbing, crying? Cover us. Fall on us. The women beat their breasts and wail for Jesus, reminding me of the “voice heard in Ramah, [with] wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children [as] she refused to be consoled, because they [were] no more” (Matt 2). The wailing women believed that Jesus, the son, the child, of God, would be no more.

Many children are no more as Washington DC girls go missing. Many children across the globe didn't make it to this night or will not survive this night due to hunger or abuse. Jesus was on to something—do not weep for me, weep for yourselves and your children.

Weep for 11 year old Tysen Benz of Marquette, Michigan, who hanged himself recently after receiving text messages that led him to believe a girl he considered his girlfriend had herself committed suicide. But come to find out, it was all a hoax. Not a hoax for little Tysen or his mother, but a living hell. Weeping for her child because he was no more. Weep for yourselves and your children.

Weep when there is around 28% of Durham's children living in poverty. Weep when an 8-year-old elementary student at a San Bernadino school is caught in a cross-fire of a murder-suicide and dies. Weep for yourselves and your little children.

Weep for all the children trapped in a chemical attack in Syria by no cause of their own. Weep for their tortured, burning, writhing bodies. Weep for their future. Weep for yourselves.

Every time a child of God is killed, one more nail goes into the body of Jesus.

No wonder Jesus says, “Do not weep for me.” He knows we have so much about which to weep. When Jesus and the two criminals are led to the place called the Skull, we realize there's so much more about which to weep. What do people do as Jesus is crucified? We're told that they cast lots to divide his clothing “and the people stood by, watching...” while leaders scoffed and soldiers mocked. The people stood by, watching. They didn't say anything or do anything. Watching as the King of the Jews, the incarnate God, their God, was painted as a feeble, helpless, impotent criminal on the bloody canvas of a cross. Watching as all their hopes and dreams hanged on a cross to die and “dry up like a raisin in the sun” (Langston Hughes). The people just stood there and watched and did nothing. They didn't call the police because some of the police were doing the killing. They didn't call the pastors because some of the pastors joined in on the murder because Jesus required too much. The people stood by and watched. Watched as God's child, God's Son, was tortured on an ancient lynching tree. He was on death row and they just stood by and watched while some threw a mocking party and called him the prince of pain rather than the prince of peace.

Weep for yourselves and for your children. Weep for yourselves because all you did was watch the injustice. Weep for your children, the innocent children, sacrificed on the altar of a state's budget that can't provide an adequate educational system with reasonable resources for teaching and learning. Do you know what sin is? That is sin, social sin. Weep for the little children. You can't blame the kids for this but you can certainly hold the adults accountable. Weep for yourselves and your children.

In his book on giving and forgiving, Yale theologian Miroslav Volf, says, “Our life isn't a motion picture in which we can, like a discerning editor, run a bad scene backward, cut it out, and keep replacing it with better ones until we are pleased with the result and are ready to show it to a critical

audience.” We can’t undo our words nor our deeds, which is one reason to weep. We can’t undo the past but we can work on the present with an eye toward the future.

We can do something right now that might alter the days ahead because “there is no future without forgiveness.” We have no future without forgiveness. God gives us a future because God forgives. Weep *for yourselves* and your children. Let’s be clear that when Jesus says, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing,” he’s talking about everyone present—the weeping ones, the watching ones, the taunting ones, the criminals on his sides and the crowds present. Father, forgive them. All of them. No one is left out of his prayer. And ‘them’ is us.

We may think “Father, forgive them,” those wayward people, not following you, not believing the right way, not acting the right way, not holding to a glorified tradition. Saying, ‘Father, forgive them’ can be a way to distance ourselves from our own complicity in crucifying Jesus and perpetuating injustice. But ‘them’ is us. “Father, forgive us.”

“Do not weep for me or anyone else right now. Weep for yourselves and your children.” Jesus knew what he was saying. We are the ones in need of forgiveness. Father, forgive them? No. Father, forgive us!

*Ah, holy Jesus...
Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee!
’Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee;
I crucified thee.*

Father forgive us, for we do not know what we were doing when we nailed our salvation to the trunk of a tree. Forgive us, for thinking we have no need of our own and no desire to weep for the world, ourselves, or our children.

Father, forgive us, for just standing by and watching atrocity after atrocity happen in our neighborhoods, our nation or the world. Forgive us for our apathy, complacency, and neglect. Forgive us for watching children being slaughtered by an inept educational system and lack of community support. Show us that if one suffers, we all suffer. Forgive us, for not caring about anyone else but our own—our own work, our own family, our own culture, our own ethnicity, our own institution. Forgive us, for not looking beyond ourselves.

Father, forgive us, for being so numb toward the pain of others. Forgive us, for not mourning with those who mourn after their churches or synagogues or mosques or clinics or schools or gyms or homes or government buildings or airplanes, are bombed. Forgive us, for nurturing empty empathy.

Father, forgive us, for making nationalism a religion and war its liturgy (Stanley Hauerwas). Forgive us for salivating after war and forgetting your deep desire that we would study war no more.

Father, forgive us, for mocking the deaths of others on death row and forgetting they are human beings. Forgive us for celebrating death of any kind. Forgive us for the ways in which we knowingly or unknowingly hang people in trees, lynch bodies on streets, beat others up in prisons, or drag people around on airplanes. Forgive us, for saluting the ongoing destructive victory of violence.

Father, forgive us, for demonizing difference and for not recognizing we are all children of God. Forgive us, for building binaries of brutal boundaries that bind the other. Forgive us, for spewing demeaning language toward others, embracing an ethic that is unethical because it is stripped of your love and grace.

Father, forgive us, for trusting in ourselves, our doctors, our lawyers, our accountants, our professors, our pastors, our coaches, our tutors, our mechanics, our nannies, more than you! Forgive us, for thinking that hanging a little cross around our neck allows us to lord over Jesus. Forgive us for thinking too highly of ourselves or too low of ourselves. Forgive us for thinking and acting like we are god or like there is no God. Father, forgive us.

We weep for ourselves and we weep for our children whom Jesus loves. We weep because we crucified thee.

It's been more than 2,000 years and we still don't know what we are doing. That's the honest truth. So whenever we face the darkness of any night, the darkness of this night, let our prayer not be, "Father, forgive *them*" but "Father, forgive us." Father, forgive me.