

“Father, Forgive Them”

*A meditation offered by Lisa Cataldo, PhD,
at The Three Hours service, April 6, 2012.*

Good Friday.

Based on Luke 23: 32-35.

I am a psychotherapist, and nearly every day I sit with people who are survivors of terrible acts of betrayal, and abuse, and all manner of hurt at the hands of others. And I accompany them as they struggle to forgive, to think about when, and how, and whether to forgive. And I realize that as much as I believe in forgiveness, sometimes it seems like just too much to ask.

I'm sure we've all heard the idea that forgiving someone who has hurt us is not for the benefit of the other person, but for ourselves. Forgiveness frees us. It frees us from the shackles of bondage to a potentially everlasting hurt. As Hannah More, the 18th century religious writer, said: “Forgiveness is the economy of the heart . . . Forgiveness saves the expense of anger, the cost of hatred, the waste of spirits.” Perhaps the author Isabelle Holland said it most simply: “As long as you don't forgive, who and whatever it is will occupy rent-free space in your head.” I, for one, don't want to give other people rent-free space in my head; and I'm sure that my wounded patients don't want to, either. But sometimes forgiveness seems like just too much to ask.

So here's a thought that comforts me: Forgiveness is impossible. So says French philosopher Jacques Derrida. What he calls “pure” forgiveness, forgiveness without condition, is impossible. For Derrida, forgiveness that is offered in exchange for repentance, or as a means to achieve reconciliation, or freedom from feelings of anger or resentment, is not pure forgiveness. It looks like forgiveness but ultimately it is an exchange. I forgive you *because* you're sorry, or *because* I need to be in relationship with you, or *because* not forgiving you is burdening me. These gestures are real, they are important and necessary, Derrida says, but they are not *pure* forgiveness.

Forgiveness is impossible. And yet forgiveness is at the very heart of the Christian faith. Forgiveness—pure, free and unconditional forgiveness—is one way to describe the very essence of the story we remember together in the Christian community in these three holy days. Christians are called to forgiveness as much as they are called to love—to bestow it and receive it, to trust in the promise of it.

Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” If you're like me, you've heard this passage countless times. Maybe you've thought about the ways in which we often really don't know the motivations or implications of our

actions. As a psychotherapist, I believe that it's true—so often, we do not know what we are doing, and so, perhaps, we, and others, are forgivable. And yet, this too is a kind of exchange—we forgive, or we seek forgiveness *because* we humans, so often, do not know what we are doing. But Derrida challenges me—there is no “because” in Pure Forgiveness. It is just given. For nothing, not because of anything, but out of love, pure and simple.

So how did Jesus do it? What was it that allowed him to extend forgiveness to those who are in the process of humiliating him, of torturing him, of killing him? How did he do that?

He didn't. He didn't forgive them. He didn't say, “I forgive you.” What he did do is pray—he prayed that God, the one he called Father, would forgive.

Now maybe you're thinking that this is just arguing semantics, that the phrasing of these last words isn't important. But just maybe it is—maybe the depiction of Jesus as asking *God* to forgive is important. This human Jesus, this man who faced death deserted by his friends and without an answer from his God, did not attempt the impossible. But maybe in these words, “Father, forgive them,” he modeled something that can teach us about human forgiveness.

Pure forgiveness is impossible. We always have some desire, some condition, some conscious or unconscious need, even if it is the wholly legitimate need for our own peace of mind and our own freedom from resentment and anger. We—frail, conditioned, and needful humans that we are—cannot forgive, purely, unconditionally, perfectly, as God forgives.

If forgiveness is impossible, are we then to just give up? To imagine that our human attempts to forgive are empty or meaningless? Oh no. As my late mentor Henri Nouwen wrote, “Forgiveness is the name of love, practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all of us love poorly,” he writes. “We need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour—unceasingly.”

So we are called to gesture toward the impossible. Our own desire counts. Our own effort toward forgiveness counts. We must do what we can do, will what we can will, forgive as we are able, as imperfectly as that may be. And like the human Jesus on the cross, we can take hope that when we reach the limits of our human capacity, that's where God steps in.

Where the human reaches its limits, the divine reaches out to meet us, to carry us over the threshold into possibility that eludes us in our limited human life. We reach out toward forgiveness, and there we meet God, reaching back, over that gap that we cannot cross for ourselves. Jesus in his dying moments could not cross it—and yet he trusted in the reach of God, the reach that meets us at our limits, and makes the impossible, somehow, not too much to ask.