

"Father forgive them..."

Good Friday Homily

March 25, 2005

by Father Brian Joyce

Here's my starting point. The mystery and the gift of Jesus Christ began at least fifteen billion years ago with an explosion or flaring forth or big bang of God's unconditional, unconquerable love, and the beginning of a journey toward which we can't imagine. But it's a journey toward unity in our God in a way that is beyond our fondest hopes, bringing us all together into a spectacular life together with the whole universe and with our God.

There were amazing points along the way that we might look at. Four point five billion years ago, our planet came into existence. That was amazing! And then there was a huge breakthrough the first time our human family appeared, and the journey with our God of our universe developed consciousness and understanding and mind and will, the Human Race.

And then came, I guess, the most amazing breakthrough of all in the person of Jesus Christ. Our God became uniquely present among one of us. I think of the presence of Jesus among us, first of all, as a breakthrough and, secondly, as a model for what we're all supposed to be. So, we think of Jesus as a breakthrough in our human journey and the story of our universe and a model for what we are all to be.

And Jesus says, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." We look back and take a deep breath and we are amazed. After all they have done to him, we are amazed that he is able to say, "Father, forgive them." And our second feeling is fear because if Jesus is not just a breakthrough of God into our universe, but a model of what we are supposed to be, we hear him say, "Father, forgive them" and we say, "We're supposed to be like that?" That's scary, not just amazing, but scary!

Two weeks ago, we had Dr. Fred Luskin from Stanford University with us, the co-founder and director of the Stanford University Forgiveness Project. And he told a story of speaking in a Presbyterian Church or Retreat Center about forgiveness, and he described the building. I'm not sure it wasn't the Stations of the Cross, but all around it, there were up to twenty images of Jesus hanging on the cross. He was surrounded by images of Christ on the cross. And he began talking to them about forgiveness, not in terms of reconciliation or becoming friends again with someone, but of letting go of the anger, the hurt, the resentment over maybe someone taking your parking place, or maybe somebody in front of you in line at the market, slowing you up when you are in a hurry or maybe your mother who hurt you, or was mean to you, or maybe a teacher who abused you, or maybe a husband who cheated on you. And before long, the whole group was in an uproar, saying

"That's impossible. We can't do that!" And his answer, Jewish (He's Jewish.), was "Look at these crosses. He's your boy, not mine. And he's the one who said, 'Seventy times seven you forgive' and 'Father, forgive them.' He's your boy, not mine!"

Well, Jesus is "our boy" and more. He is our savior, our salvation, and our Lord. So, we have to be a people of forgiveness. I always say, "It's our signature." Four years ago, I put together ten commandments for forgiveness. At least once a year, I dust them off and go over them again because I think they are so basic to who we are, a people of forgiveness. Let me share them with you quickly....

The First Commandment is: Forgiveness is not easy. There is no cheap grace. There is no quick fix. A mother might say to her child, "Tell him you are sorry." And the child says, "I'm sorry." It doesn't mean a thing. It's quick and easy and not real. So the first commandment that we all know deep down, forgiveness is not easy.

The Second Commandment is: Forgiveness is not forgetting. We say once in awhile, "Forgive and forget." Baloney! We don't forget. Forgiveness is about a change of heart. It's not about a bad memory, or having a senior moment. Forgiveness is not forgetting.

The Third Commandment: Forgiveness does not overlook evil. It doesn't mean that we accept injustice or naively pretend that all is well when it isn't. It doesn't mean denial. It doesn't mean "Let's pretend." So, number three is forgiveness does not overlook evil.

Number Four: Forgiveness is not destructive. What that means is where there are things that are harmful or wrong going on, it doesn't mean just back to business as usual. Let the hurt and damage go on. That's the fourth commandment, forgiveness is not destructive.

And the Fifth Commandment; Forgiveness is not the same thing as approval. Forgiveness doesn't mean condoning something that was wrong. We can be forgiving, and at the same time, express our disagreement, our disapproval. We can really not condone harmful behavior, but forgive.

Those are the first five, and they are all negative. Forgiveness is not easy. Forgiveness is not forgetting. Forgiveness does not overlook evil. Forgiveness is not destructive. And forgiveness is not the same thing as approval.

Here are the next five of the Ten Commandments.

Forgiveness is based on recognizing and admitting that people are bigger than what they did to us. They are bigger than their faults. People are always larger and more than their mistakes or wrongdoing. In other words, I don't define somebody for the rest of their life for something they did to me. We know there is more than that.

Forgiveness, number seven, is being willing to allow a person who has offended us to start over again. The more common thing that we say (I don't know about you.) ... that I say is, "Never again. No way. I'll never let that happen to me again. I'll never have anything to do with him or her again. No way!" Forgiveness means letting go of that. Number seven is Forgiveness is being willing to allow a person who has offended us (They have!), who has hurt us (They have!) to start over again.

Number eight: Forgiveness recognizes the humanity of a person who has wronged us and also recognizes our own humanity. We have our own faults and our own shortcomings and our own contributions. Sometimes it's one percent. Sometimes it's ninety-nine percent.... our own contribution to what went wrong.

Number nine: Forgiveness surrenders the right to get even. Now, isn't that really common? You don't think so? "I'm going to get you back!... Payback time is coming, revenge!" Or, at least, "Some day you'll be sorry." It means letting go of that and saying, "Forgiveness surrenders the right to get even."

And, finally, number ten is: Forgiveness is we wish the person who hurt us, or the group that hurt us, we wish them well. In fact, we wish them the best. Those are the ten commandments. Give them to Father George to bring to U. C. Berkeley and share with everyone!

I want to add a few things to that though, what I think of as four tools for working at "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Four tools for working at forgiveness.... The first which I think is the foundation is humor, a sense of humor. It means "Lighten up!" After all, we're the people who are meeting today for Friday on which Jesus was murdered, executed, and we call it "Good Friday." How's that for a sense of humor? How's that for holding things lightly? We call it "Good."

You know, I have an aside here and I have to admit that in the back of my mind is Terry Schiavo. A great thinker said recently, "There are two great lies in our country and in our culture and in our lifetime. One lie is that life is an absolute good and the other lie is that death is an absolute evil. As a church community, we don't believe that. We believe that life is God-given and good, but it is a limited good because there is more. There is more to come. This isn't all there is. And death is an evil to be generally avoided. But that is limited too because Jesus and our God have conquered death. We don't fear it that much. And that's why our Church, for four hundred years, has taught that the obligation to keep someone alive and sustain life is limited. The obligation to use disproportionately burdensome means to sustain life isn't there because we don't have to go on having a grim stranglehold on life, because we don't believe that death has a grim stranglehold on us. And that leads us back to holding everything a little bit more lightly. Good Friday.... Sense of humor.

And it makes it possible for us to move to the next tool, which is forgiveness. In forgiveness all I mean is letting go of the anger, the resentment, the frustration, the rage that most of the time, we are the only ones that know about it. Let me give you an example. I am driving down the freeway and somebody cuts me off, almost hits me, and I am in a hurry. I am furious. I am furious for the next

five minutes. I am furious for the next ten minutes. I am furious for the rest of the day. And that driver doesn't know a thing about it. He is as happy as a lark. He loves the world and the world loves him. He's got no problems and I got a problem that I am holding on tightly to. It's time to lighten up and let go, and I call that forgiveness!

The next tool is compassion, to have a sense of the other person's feeling and where they are coming from, and what they are going through. And that leads us to the last tool, which is reconciliation, which is joining the journey of unity, coming together once again, as brothers and sisters.

"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." That's an amazing word and an amazing work. That word and that work belong to Jesus AND they belong to us. Amen.