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The First of Jesus' "Seven Last Words":
"Them. They"

Luke 23:34 Common English Bible Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing."

*"Father, forgive **them**, for **they** don't know what they're doing." **Them. They.***

These two words, these two tiny pronouns, appear again and again in Luke's story of this last day of Jesus' earthly life. And this intrigues me.

- ["Pilate] said to **them**, "You brought this man before me...."
- "Pilate addressed **them**.... Pilate said to **them**...."
- "...**they** shouted, 'Release Barabbas....'"
- "**They** kept shouting out, Crucify him!"
- "...**they** were adamant, shouting their demand...."
- "**They** put the cross on his back and made him carry it...."
- "**They** also led two other criminals to be executed...."
- "...**they** crucified him...."

They. **They.** It's word that every pastor knows all-too-well. "*Pastor, you know there are some folks who don't like the length of your hair, **they** don't like the hymns you pick, **they** don't like it that you wear jeans too often, **they** don't like it when the service runs past the Biblically-ordained 60 minutes, **they** don't like it that there are all these new people in their pew.*" And, of course, the pastor asks, "*Tell me who **they** are so I can talk to them personally.*" "*Oh, I'm sorry; **they** don't want me to tell you their names.*"

They, they. It can be an oh-so-dispiriting word, maybe the most dispiriting and dysfunctional word that gets used in the church, and certainly it is a word that can cause church leaders and especially the pastor to brood over who and how many and how important the complaints **they** are making are – yet without any way to do the

work, the Christian work, even just the grownup work, of respectfully and helpfully – up-building-ly, Paul might said – talking one-on-one for the sake of advancing God’s Kingdom in that place. No, instead “they,” hiding behind cowardly anonymity, diminish and distract from the work of God’s reign. They. **They.**

Moreover, the very anonymity of “they” and “them” makes it easy to imagine, to scapegoat, the people who are saying these things. Perhaps that’s why the Common English translation uses this word, this formulation, so very often: to call our attention through repetition to the fact that “they” indeed both allows folks to hide and hurt from behind that mask of anonymity, and allows us to assign our own choices to who “they” are. In Christian history, too very often, much, much too often, the “they,” “the them,” who are picked out have been “the Jews.” For generations and generations, to the shame of Christians, Jewish people around the world have found themselves especially nervous during Holy Week as those terrible un-interpreted words particularly from John’s gospel account are slung about and used as weapons, and too often words became violent actions, and too often those actions have turned lethal against the very people to whom we should be most grateful – the people of Jesus’ birth and lineage, the people whom one scholar says we Christians have been “grafted onto” through Christ. More than one person has called anti-Judaism Christianity’s original sin and that is true, and it continues to stain us and dishonor us when we witness in this country in the last three months alone more than 140 synagogues vandalized, desecrated, or burned.

Sometimes that anonymous and ubiquitous repetition of “they” and “them” plays to and exacerbates our fears, plays to the worst that is in us, instead of the best that our Lord calls us to be. In the classic movie “Casablanca,” at the every end Police Chief Renault says to his officers, “*Round up the usual suspects,*” and too often in our day and our time the usual suspects have become our Muslim brothers and sisters, children

of the same God whom we serve, but who through the lies of too many leaders have become the “them” to be feared and hated, the ones who are the usual suspects whom we shall blame for each and every scary thing that might happen. In doing so, we betray perhaps the most central witness in the story of our Savior, the one that begins with the angel announcing to Mary “Do not be afraid” and the same words offered on Easter Sunday by the angel to those who sought the resurrected Jesus. “Do not be afraid.” Our God would tell us that fear is the antithesis of faith, that hatefulness is the opposite of the hospitality so often enjoined in the Bible, that not to welcome the stranger and the immigrant is to forget that our Lord Himself had to flee from terror and was welcomed by another nation. But “they” would too often tell us to put away these purportedly childish things and form our lives instead around suspiciousness, narrowness, and even xenophobia because we must fear “them.”

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” I am intrigued by this statement of Jesus’ for another reason: is that little word **“for”** in the sentence meant to be restrictive? Is it meant to assert that forgiveness is conditional upon someone’s wronging you *unintentionally*? There were certainly enough folks in the story, whom Luke collates into that collection of “they’s” – the soldiers, the crowds, some of the religious leaders. It seems that Jesus is offering forgiveness to these ones precisely because they don’t know the magnitude, the immensity, of what they are taking part in – the state-sanctioned imperial murder of the Son of God. And yet sometimes that is you and me, from the small mindless things we do that we wish we hadn’t, to those large mistakes we have made that we never meant to but which hurt in ways we never imagined. It is good to know that Jesus, reflecting the God of gracious love known through the law and the prophets, also offers forgiveness to you and me when we bumble our way into wronging other people, when we too *“don’t know what [we] do.”*

But what about those times that we do know? Is there an unspoken corollary to

Jesus' words? **IF** those soldiers, those religious leaders, that crowd had known what they were doing, do Jesus' words suggest that forgiveness would **not** be forthcoming? "*Father do not forgive them, for they knew precisely what they were doing.*" It's not in the text, of course, but it IS a feeling, a worry, that each of us, I suspect, sometimes carries in our souls. I think of those times when, knowing full well which buttons to push, I said something mean or hurtful to my spouse. I think of those times that I chose a harsh word over a gentle one, chose to exacerbate a situation instead of de-escalate it. I think of those occasions when I too knowingly gave into fear and passed by on the other side or didn't speak up when folks were being castigated and even harmed because of the color of their skins or their class or their ethnicity or their nationality. I think of those times when I joined in the laughter – or, God help me – or was the instigator of a joke about someone's sexual orientation. Father, will you forgive me? For I knew exactly what I was doing.

Forgiveness. Such a powerful, strange, mysterious, sometimes misused word. Forgiveness. It's not a concept, not an action, that comes easily to us human beings. And sometimes we very readily get it confused with other things. Sometimes we disguise self-righteousness in the garb of fake forgiveness. Sometimes we even use forgiveness as a weapon to prolong the pain instead of move beyond it. Sometimes we confuse forgiving and forgetting and say morally dubious things to people who have been abused by evil when we over-simplistically tell them to "forgive and forget."

But I think we are missing something here: A wise seminary professor of mine once said that in every story from the Bible we always inescapably and often unconsciously put ourselves in the role of one of the characters of the story. And, I don't know about you, but I have to confess that I sometimes put myself in the magnanimous role of God, deigning to forgive those who "need" my dispensation. Ouch. We are all prone to it. "*Father, forgive them.*" **Them.** Just as in the parable of

the laborers in the vineyard, where Jesus tells of the one-hour workers who received the exact same pay as those who worked all day long, and where we too often unconsciously assume ourselves to be one of those workers who labored all day, maybe it would be more honest and more authentic for us to remember that often it is **we** who are “them”! It is **we** who stand in need of forgiveness, not some sort of “they” or “them” whom we think of ourselves as somehow superior to. It is **we** who are often the one-hour-workers and God through Christ miraculously loves us just as lavishly as those who truly labored all the day long. *“Father, forgive them.”* Jesus’ words convict me and remind me that I need to indeed confess that too often “them” is actually me!

What shall we say, then, finally, about this tangled topic? The Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, lectionary reading for this Sunday is instructive; hear these words from the prophet Jeremiah (31:1-4 NRSV):

At that time, says the Lord, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. Thus says the Lord: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness.... [and] I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built.... Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers.

You and I have known the wilderness of being among those who have hurt others and stood in need of forgiveness. We have known the wilderness of withholding forgiveness and have experienced how that doesn’t just hurt the one who first hurt us but also corrodes us with festering resentment. We have known the wilderness of being unable to pray Jesus’ prayer with Him for we have preferred our prayer to be a weapon. We have known the wilderness being among the crowds, being part of the “them” and “they” who mock the Lord when we turn our backs on Syrian babies dying, when we continue to not rise up against feckless leaders who continue to allow

disturbed people to have guns which continue to slaughter our children and increase the suicide rate of our elderly. Father, forgive us, for sometimes, indeed, we have known exactly what we were doing.

But, my friends, still, even on Good Friday there is good news, and the prophet spoke of it, and we shall wait in vigil these three days for it again to burst the tomb of deathliness and destruction: *"I have loved you with an everlasting love,"* says our God, *"therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you."* And part of that everlasting love is that we are indeed offered forgiveness both for what we intended to do and for what we stumbled into, a forgiveness that always also challenges us to better reflect the God who loves each and every person He has made and demands justice for each and every person. We can indeed come in from the wilderness for grace has found us and will keep on finding us. For, as our choir so beautifully sang, "Yes, my Jesus loves me." And not just me, but all those "theys" and "thems." For the good news even on Good Friday is that indeed Jeremiah is right: God's faithfulness yet continues, undeterred, undiminished, undefeated. For such good news, let us say: Thanks be to God!