**“A Radical Transmutation of Consciousness”**

**A sermon for Palm Sunday, 2016**

**Written by the Rev. Rachel Wildman**

*"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."*

We’ve all said this before…typically in Jest. It is 10 minutes before your boss is coming for dinner and your children have just dumped out the bin of tiny legos across the living room floor—“Oh Father,” you’ve said, trying to remain lighthearted but truly panicking, “forgive them, for they know not what they do…”

Or, perhaps like me, you have let out the most insane belch at the dinner table to the kids’ wild applause and your spouse has said, “Oh Father…forgive her, for she knows not what she does…”

PAUSE

But, Jesus says it in the Gospel of Luke today in complete seriousness as he hangs from the cross, watching those below him casting lots for his clothing. In this context, this request by Jesus, *God* in human form, is so radical, so hard to take in that it can seem like the punchline of a joke…Certainly, the early church theologians wished it were. To them, and likely to many of us, it seemed unimaginable that God, himself, in the person of Jesus would request forgiveness without requiring repentence, especially for a sin so heinous as killing God incarnate.

Despite the desire for this phrase, not found in the other Gospel accounts of Jesus’ last moments on the cross, to be inauthentic, scholarship strongly suggests that it is. So, what are we to do with it? Does it really mean what it seems to mean—that humanity’s *worst* sins are forgiven, even when their perpetrators aren’t remorseful? That *we* are forgiven, even when we aren’t remorseful?

Because this line is so radical, some still argue that it doesn’t really mean what it seems to. One scholar[[1]](#footnote-1) notes that it is very similar to Roman Clemency writings—writings about Roman Emperors who have conquered a land, and then, in their “great” benevolence, have granted leniency to all those who are now their subjects, allowing them to remain in the land, and giving them the wonderful opportunity of working for the Empire—working in the interests of their own oppression. These writings actually care very little for the people granted clemency. These writings are meant to build up the image of the Emperor—to make him look giving and compassionate, when in reality, he isn’t.

I suppose this is what the author of Luke may have intended to do for God—whose reputation suffered a bit when he actually let Jesus, the supposed savior, die, rather than coming to some triumphant rescue on the cross.

But, whatever Luke’s author meant by it, I can’t believe its divine truth is really that of a God who didn’t truly care for the people for whom he prayed, but only for his own image.

As I consider this hotly-debated phrase as Gospel—Good News--living among us today, in the midst of the fear, anger, and polarization, it seems to me that it is as radical as it appears. It has to be. Its divine truth for me is exactly what is says—forgiveness, no strings attached. Jesus asked for it in that moment on behalf of those who would maim, stifle, and extinguish a part of God in the world…in so doing, he asked for it on behalf of all of those across time and space, including NOW, who have maimed, stifled, or extinguished any manifestation of God in the world.

That same forgiveness God held out in 33 CE in the person of Jesus is available to all of us now. It is available to each of us in this room, to each person in the towns in which we live, to all those in our country, to all those in the world…and, as hard as it may be to accept, it is available to each of us, to each of “them” NO STRINGS ATTACHED.

PAUSE.

We have been encouraged to repent all of Lent. In our readings, in our prayers… And yet, this day, as we leave Lent behind, what we hear from Luke’s Gospel is God’s forgiveness without any expectation of repentance.

I sat with this apparent contradiction quite a lot this week. And as I chewed it over, I came to see an incredible irony in it. The irony is that the simplicity of Jesus’ request for forgiveness, no strings attached, is so RADICAL that we can’t actually “be” forgiven—we can’t actually exist as ones forgiven--unless we have repented.

The Greek word typically translated as repentance is Metanoia, and it literally means “a change in mind”… One scholar described it as a change in the trend and action of the whole inner nature, intellectual, affectional and moral…a total transmutation of consciousness.[[2]](#footnote-2) In order to live into the radical forgiveness we, and each and every person is offered by God, we must undergo an entire change of mind—our whole inner nature and consciousness must undergo transmutation. We have to adopt an entirely different worldview than the eye-for-an-eye, tooth-for-a-tooth perspective that presses in on us.

This notion of repentance is very different than simple remorse and a commitment to doing better in the future. This notion of repentance is being open to God’s transforming power in all aspects of our selves—our logic, our emotions, our expectations for ourselves and the world.

It’s not that God won’t offer the forgiveness until we repent…it’s that God has offered it—it is an offer in perpetuity---and in order to wrap our heads around that standing truth and live as a people so radically forgiven, we have to repent—we have to change our whole minds in a massive transmutation of consciousness.

This is not the sort of “changing our minds” we can will. We can’t just decide to “change our minds” in this radical sense. It is the sort of transformation that comes from a series of divine encounters…it is the sort of transformation of a scale that only God can enact. We cannot will it, but we can create the conditions that are most likely to give rise to it…we can create the conditions that allow us to be maximally open to God.

To me, the glorious simplicity of our forgiven-ness, and the metanoia—repentance—we must undergo to live into it is a most poignant invitation by the Church to Holy Week. To me, Holy Week is an invitation to create the conditions for metanoia to occur. The number and character of the Holy Week services have resulted many times in my own breaking open to the movement and call of God in my life…to my own moments of metanoia, where I can see the world with God’s logic—the upending logic of love-- and trust in the certainty of the forgivenness of myself, and of all those around me.

It is not every Holy Week that I experience a metanoia…but the series of experiences that Holy Week invites me into certainly create the conditions for my maximal openness to God.

We do not wave our palm fronds today for an Emperor of Old, a King who conquers us and then simply tolerates our presence, or worse, allows us the “privilege” of being enslaved to his oppressive agenda. Today, we wave our Palm fronds for a King who lived among us, healed among us, taught among us, suffered among us, died among us (rather than coorce us to do something we do not feel is right), and *then* forgave us and rose among us. We wave our Palm fronds for this King who *still* lives among us, heals among us, teaches among us, and when we still don’t quite understand, dies among us again, forgives us again, and rises among us again to continue the work of bringing *his* Kingdom—A Kingdom of forgiveness, of unconditional love--to fruition.

As you walk from here with your palm fronds, let them be a reminder to you of the kind of King you wave them for. He is a King of journey among us, of radical forgiveness, of such certainty that love should be the basis of all, that he dies and rises in that love in perpetuity. Put them somewhere where you can see them each day this week, and whether you are able to attend Holy Week services or not, let them help you to pause, for just a moment, and invite the radical nature of the forgiveness they represent to soften your heart… alter your perspective…and open you to a moment of mind-changing transformation—of embrace by God.

May the warmth of God’s forgiveness pour into us and then out from us to all whom we encounter this week, and always. AMEN.

1. Shelly Matthews, “Clemency as Cruelty: Forgiveness and Force in the Dying Prayers of Jesus and Stephen,” Biblical Interpretation 17 (2009) 118-146. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metanoia\_(theology) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)