

Sermon November 20, 2022 Luke 23:27-43

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today is the last Sunday of the church year. The calendar year ends on December 31, but the church year ends this week. Just like on New Year's Eve, today we think about the year past and the new one to come. The world knows nothing of the truth that in the Lord's time the years themselves will indeed also come to an end. God has awakened and transferred us out of the world and into his kingdom. He has taught us about the dreadful Day of the Lord to come. Today is another reminder for us lest the routines and worries of ordinary life lull us back to sleep and we are again lost to the world.

The first word of Our Lord from the cross is recorded in today's Gospel.

33 And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. 34 And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. 35 And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" 36 The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine 37 and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" (Luke 23:33–37, ESV) .

Our translations of the Bible here usually read, "And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'" It gives the impression Jesus said this only one time concerning just those people there that day. This is not the case. What the Bible really records is that when Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, ..." the request applied not to just those gathered at the cross, but the request applied to all people

everywhere at all times from then until the end of time. The fulfillment of the request was ongoing and not completed until the last day. The point is that this wasn't a one-time prayer but was the constant plea of the Messiah to His Father.

The words of the petition are very straight forward: "Forgive them." On the face of it, He is asking that the Father not hold His unjust trial and crucifixion against those who were directly responsible, but it is more than that. The only way they can be forgiven that trespass is if He is sacrificed for their sins. In other words, He is praying that He be crucified rather than them.

When Jesus says "them," he is deliberately vague. It certainly refers to the soldiers, but it includes the crowd that yelled "crucify," Pilate, and Herod. It also includes the Sanhedrin, his disciples, and the two malefactors who were crucified with Him. It refers, in the end, to all the world, to every sinner. When He prays "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," He is praying for you. It is even more striking that Jesus' prayer is offered from the very place that the prayer is answered – his cross.

No one except Jesus and His Father really know what is happening at the crucifixion. The soldiers don't realize they are offering up the atonement of the world on the altar of the cross. The devil doesn't know that he is crushing his own head. The disciples don't know that Jesus was anointed for this purpose or that He will rise from the dead even though they've been told so. The whole world should fall down before the cross in reverent joy as the Son of Man is lifted up from the earth, but instead they are wailing, mocking, and gambling.

Despite all this, the Lord prays for them. Even in the moments of His worst torment, as He is forsaken by the Father, becomes sin and guilt for us, He has pity. "Those poor sinners," says the Lord, looking upon

openly evil men and cowards, “don’t know what they are doing. They mean it for evil but I mean it good. I have come to give them more than a seamless garment. Crucify Me, Father. Take this payment for these sinners. Open My side to let out the Blood and Water. Let them feast upon Me and make their hearts glad. Send Me to Hell in their place. Forgive them and open paradise and give them to Me as My inheritance.”

Our church has shut-in members all over Pittsburgh. I recently made the trip to visit the group of people we have along highway 19 and on up to Cranberry. To get to my first stop in McCandless, it is often faster to take Mt. Royal Boulevard through Glenshaw and Elfinwild, make the left onto Ferguson Road, and then on to highway 19. My preferred route to get to Mt. Royal Boulevard is to cross the Highland Park Bridge, take 28 South, and then take exit 5 onto highway 8. Good thing there is no road construction in Pittsburgh these days! Ha ha. You know that is a lie. It’s hard to get anywhere these days without hitting construction. Right now, when you cross the Highland Park bridge from here, you cannot catch highway 28 South. In order to get to 28 South, you have to go north. Makes sense, right? The way I have been doing that is to follow highway 28 North after the bridge, taking exit 7, and then making my way through the neighborhood until I get to the entrance back on to 28 South and then on to exit 5/ highway 8.

The moral of the story here is that sometimes in order to reach the desired destination you have to go in the opposite direction. This is very often the way God works. I often talk about God’s great reversal in Jesus Christ. In order for us to reach our final destination in heaven, Jesus had to travel in the opposite direction. He had to go to hell to suffer the consequences for our sin. Also, in order for us to rise from our graves on the last day, Jesus had to die and be buried in his tomb. Jesus had to go the opposite direction in order to get us to the right destination.

As we wait for all the work of Jesus to have its final effect, it is important for us to now travel in the right direction. If we go the wrong way once again, we may well wind up back in death and hell. The first step is to do what the criminal did – ask Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom. Jesus’ answer to us is the same as to him, “Truly I say to you ... you will be with me in paradise.” That’s a good start. It is also crucial that we travel in the right direction of regular worship, fellowship, daily prayer, and a life lived according to the commandments of the Lord.

Jesus’ first words from the cross were, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Our prayer today is that his last word to us is when we are welcomed into his paradise, and Jesus says to us, “Well done good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master.” Amen!

The peace of God guard your hearts and minds as you believe and trust in him. Amen.

Pastor Ron Breight Christ Lutheran Church Forest Hills, Pennsylvania

Join us for worship online! Visit our website christlutheranfh.org, click the blue Facebook link at the bottom of the page, and you will be taken to our Facebook page. There you can view our 10 am Sunday service live or watch it later at your convenience. The Sunday service is also available for viewing on our YouTube page – Christ Lutheran Forest Hills, PA.

Special thanks to the Rev. David Petersen for material for this sermon.