

“The Art of Jesus: He Forgives”

April 2nd, 2017

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I want to begin this morning with a story I heard on NPR a few months ago, and it's the kind of story I find I cannot stop thinking about. It's about a man named Joseph Linsk. He's 94 years old. He's in failing health now and living in his hometown of Atlantic City, New Jersey. He told a deeply honest, personal story that has haunted him since childhood . . . and it goes something like this . . .

When he was 8 years old he was running in the schoolyard and accidentally hit a boy and broke the boy's glasses. It was going to cost \$2 to fix the boy's glasses. (Those were the days! Two dollars!) Joseph was afraid. He didn't know how he would find the money to pay the boy in order to fix the glasses. He didn't want to tell his parents what he had done. He was scared and desperate.

He went home that day and remembered that their cleaning lady, an African American woman by the name of Pearl, was paid \$2 every week by the family. Each week the family would put \$2 in a jar for Pearl. At the end of the week, she would take the money as a payment for her work.

Joseph made a terrible decision. He took the money out of the jar, brought it to school, then paid the little boy for his glasses, and never told anyone what he did. At the end of the week Pearl went to get her money and it wasn't there. She asked about it. The family decided that Pearl must have taken the money herself. That she was trying to cheat the family.

Joseph heard all of this and said nothing. He did nothing. He was eight years old and afraid. And then the family decided to fire Pearl, believing she was untrustworthy to be in their house. Again, Joseph said nothing. And then, because Atlantic City was a much smaller place back in the 1930s, word got out that Pearl was a cheater and thief and that she couldn't be trusted. Pearl, an innocent African American woman, couldn't find work in the neighborhood anymore.

Joseph Linsk is now 94 years old. He waited until he was 94 to tell this story. He had been tormented by what he did for over eighty years. He has carried grief. And shame. And sorrow. He kept it a secret, but secrets always stay inside our hearts, and they become like a low-throbbing cavity that never heals.

As he told his poignant story on NPR, it ended with this little plea – That the woman's name was Pearl. He didn't know her last name. But that if anyone in Atlantic City might still be living who could remember her or one of her children, to please get in touch with him, because more than anything else before he leaves this earth he wanted to make restitution to the woman's family, and most of all, he wanted to ask for forgiveness for what he did when he was eight years old. Forgiveness. Forgiveness.

I wrote Steve Inskeep this week at NPR and told him I was moved by the odd story a few months ago and was curious if anyone had stepped forward who knew Pearl or her family. So far, no. No response from the family of Pearl.

Is there anything messier than forgiveness? You would think it would be so simple – one human being hurts another human being and then forgiveness is unwrapped like a present on Christmas morning for everyone to enjoy – but it's not so simple. Maybe it should be but it's not.

Joseph Linsk did something wrong. He wanted forgiveness. He needed forgiveness. But at this point – eighty years later – it seems to me that he also needs to find a way to forgive himself. What more could he do? What more could be gained? It's over. It's the messy work of forgiveness. Have you ever experienced the messy feeling of forgiveness?

You see this with Jesus as he was dying on a cross. He looks at the Roman soldiers, men carrying out a horrendous act of violence and injustice. And let's be clear. Jesus was killed because of politics. He was deemed to be offensive and threatening to the Roman Empire. Politics. He was considered a menace and troublemaker. Politics. And so the Romans engineered his crucifixion. Politics. This was mob violence. This was political fanaticism. This was a political / religious lynching!

The message of Jesus was one of love and hope and justice, and people were responding to it, embracing it as a way forward for their lives. Jewish people suffering under Roman rule were responding to it. People were feeling hope, and when you've had no hope, hope is everything! The more people responded to Jesus, and the larger the crowds became, the more Roman officials took notice. To crucify Jesus was a preemptive strike to keep civil unrest to a minimum. Politics.

So there he is, hanging on a cross, and he utters what I think is the most important prayer he ever offered: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Is he condoning violence? No. Jesus would never do that. Nor should we. That would be like me saying to all the men in the world who have abused women, "Forgive them for they know not what they do." Or saying to all the drunk drivers, "Forgive them for they know not what they do."

Forgiveness is not condoning horrendous behavior. Even so, even so, Jesus seems to be offering a pathway forward, saying to the Roman soldiers carrying out their orders, "God – forgive them, forgive them, because they don't really know what they are doing." Is he letting them off the hook? Not really. That's not forgiveness.

It's wrong to steal money from a housekeeper. It's wrong to crucify another human being. But this is precisely why forgiveness is so messy . . . you don't engage forgiveness until life is broken and when life is broken, sometimes you have to put it back together anyway you can.

And that's the question. What do we do when life is broken? We can plot revenge. We can carry a grudge. We can harbor resentment. We can dig in and build a fortress over our being right and someone else wrong, protected by a moat of bitterness. But in the end none of that helps us to get on with our living.

I was driving up to northern California a few months ago, and I noticed that there is a country road that turns to the left off State Road 46, and there's a sign that reads: "Bitter Water Road." Who wants to live on Bitter Water Road? Bitter Water Road! Some of us are living Bitter Water Road this morning, aren't we? You know it and I know it. It's exhausting to live on Bitter Water Road. It's exhausting staying angry on Bitter Water Road.

This is why forgiveness should really be understood as a strategy, a pathway forward, because right, wrong or indifferent, at a certain point we need to find a pathway forward in life. Forgiveness is theological, to be sure, but it's a practical human strategy for our living. There is no friendship, no church, no marriage, no family without forgiveness.

This is why Anne Lamott spoke about forgiveness in this way: She said that bitterness is like you drinking rat poison and hoping the rat will die. When I drink the rat poison, I'm not killing the rat! I'm killing myself.

But it's messy trying to move off of Bitter Water Road, because what we don't often say, but it needs to be said, because it's true, and trust me, I know it's true within my own life experience, but sometimes I am reluctant to forgive another person or a situation because I find too much pleasure in my being wronged and hurt and mistreated. It's too delicious! It's too satisfying!

Sometimes my personal hurt becomes like an old friend. I don't want to part with it. Just like an addiction becomes like an old friend. Just like a toxic relationship becomes like an old friend. Just like an old scar becomes like an old friend. The truth is, sometimes the story of my being hurt is a narrative I don't want to release, because I get so much satisfaction from it, and to release it, that is to say, to find forgiveness for myself or grant it to someone else, requires that I become responsible for my own feelings. That is not easy. To be a victim is real. I would never diminish that for anyone. Never. But to be a victim forever is so unnecessary.

And so there he is, on a cross, and to his left and to his right are two thieves. One has enough strength to say, "If you're the Messiah, then do something. Do something for us! Help us!" The criminal on the other side says, "Don't say that to him. Don't you have any fear of God? Can't you show a little respect?"

And then as a last gasp expression of faith he says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And as an act of profound love and forgiveness, Jesus says, "Today you will be with me in paradise." It's forgiveness. It's messy. It's not always clear. But forgiveness is the oxygen of the human experience.

Now, how does this relate to our painting that I'm featuring this morning on the front of our worship bulletin? It's an amazing painting. It was done early on in Picasso's career, but interestingly enough, no one liked it enough to buy it, and so it remained in his personal collection until he died.

Unlike the abstract expressionism of last week's art, this painting is a perfect example of surrealism, that is to say, it transcends literalism and invites you to see the ghostlike realities that lurk, not only upon the canvas, but also within us. Surrealism moves us into the realm of the unconscious. That deepest place in the soul where we feel and dream in images and symbols.

In this painting, you see the white Christ figure. Limbs going in different directions. It's the chaos of crucifixion. On the right is Mary Magdalene. It is a jumble of mixed up thoughts and feelings, much like what we all feel from time to time, especially in moments when we have been hurt. You can see the small red figure climbing the ladder and hammering a nail into the paddle-like hands of Jesus.

You also see the two thieves at the bottom of the canvas. And then the figure offering vinegar to the mouth of Jesus. It's a Roman soldier on a horse. At the bottom right side of the canvas you see figures gambling. It's a wonderful painting.

But what does it mean? What does it really have to do with the sermon this week? I'm not sure. I've been living with this painting all week. I love it. I really do. I give it to you as a gift this morning. But what does it have to do with the sermon? I don't know.

I hope you can forgive me for not knowing!

I love you all. Let's love one another this week. And maybe, if you can, if it is possible for you, let go of something this week. If Jesus could do it while hanging on a cross, then surely we can do it too.

Amen.