

## Guided to Forgiveness

Ash Wednesday – 2/14/24 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Luke 23:33-34 Pastor Keith Besel

**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.”**

- ✘ Welcome to Ash Wednesday. Welcome to the season of Lent, and welcome to the journey of our Midweek Services as we are *Guided to the Cross* of Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord.
  - ➔ It’s typical to call the 40-day season of Lent a journey; a journey with our Lord as He heads to the cross.
  - ➔ This year I will not be your only tour guide, but three other pastors will join me in guiding this trek to the tree where Jesus died.
- ✘ Tonight, on Ash Wednesday, the first thing we see is ashes – placed on our foreheads in the shape of a cross. They remind us that we are dust and to dust we shall return. Why ash? Because since ancient times, people wore sackcloth and ashes when they were distressed, repentant and grieving, all of which you and I do tonight as we ponder the depth of our sins; the fact that we have turned away from God to do our own thing; to follow evil or destructive or prideful paths. We mourn with St. Paul in Romans 7 that the bad things we don’t want to do end up being the exact things that we do.
  - ➔ This symbol of ash and dust points us all the way back to Adam, the first man, whom God made from the dust of the earth and breathed life into. Adam sinned, as we all have, and Adam died, as we all will one day to eventually be turned back into dust at the end of our time on earth. We are all human; we are all finite; we are of the earth and will go back to the earth. That fact cannot be avoided; there is no detour.
- ✘ So today we remember that we are sinners and that we will die. Sure that’s morbid, but what makes the difference, even on this sad and somber day is the place where our journey is headed; the shape of the ashes on our foreheads tell us – to the cross!
  - ➔ You see, the sign of the cross points us in a new direction, a hopeful direction. Yes, we are sinners, and yes, we will die. But the cross of Christ is the only thing that is able to actually help us with those core-problems that we all have. The cross promises a fresh start that puts that sin behind us and makes our death only a stepping stone into everlasting life.
- ✘ How does that happen? Through forgiveness! Forgiveness is the bedrock; the foundation of our faith in Christ. And it’s here in the season of Lent that we go to the cross again and again; confessing our sins and receiving forgiveness.
  - ➔ The skeptics out there are quick to ask us how we know this is true? because Jesus told us so, directly from His very own lips while He hung there on the cross. He looked down upon those nailing Him to the cross and said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (v.34). Your human nature and mine wants to lash out in anger at those who cause us harm, but Jesus, in His divinity, was actually removing the punishment they deserved by doing away with their sins at that very moment.
- ✘ And we, like those who tortured Jesus, do not know what we are doing either. We sin over and over again when we should be loving and reaching out and caring for others. Yet Jesus’ cross teaches us is that He was not just forgiving a few people there on Good Friday. No, He was forgiving the whole world! By His sinless suffering and death, He was not just forgiving the sins

happening right then but the sins of all people who ever lived on earth and ever would live on earth.

→ His forgiveness from the cross is that great; that all-encompassing; that universal; that complete. There is no one that Jesus does not desire to forgive when He goes to the cross. And why? It's all about His incomprehensible love!

✘ Today is Valentine's Day; the day that kind of "guilts us" all into making sure that we actually show our sweetheart or our family or friends how much we love them. And if you forget or decide to rebel against the holiday and do not buy those flowers or chocolates or show your love in some way...well, "I pity the fool who thinks that's going to go well".

✘ Yet our Old Testament Reading, Psalm 103 tells us that when it comes to our Lord and God, His love for us is as "high as the heavens are above the earth". And He does show us there that His love is absolutely connected to His act; to His gift of forgiveness from all sin. Sometimes in a time of conflict we might be tempted to say or think, "I love you, but I can't forgive you for what you did" or the opposite, "I forgive you, but that doesn't mean I have to love you". God shows us in Jesus that either of those mindsets is a terrible perversion of both love and forgiveness.

→ Just think of how Jesus both loves and forgives us. In spite of our repeated guilt and sin – more times than we can ever count – He still loves us enough to give His life in our place and forgive us fully for our sins – past, present and the sins He knows we are yet to commit. This is true love; true forgiveness and they both begin at the cross of Christ; they both must go together!

→ It is only in Christ's love that every person – any person that kneels at the foot of the cross and confesses his/her sins to Jesus is forgiven, no questions asked. So it's both unconditional forgiveness and incomprehensible love that pours over us from our Savior.

✘ And so, what difference does that make in your heart; in your thinking; in the way that you live your life right now? As those fully forgiven by Jesus, we should now live lives of forgiveness! That means that the principle of forgiveness should be at the core of every aspect of our lives, every day of our lives. Our instinct should not be anger, but forgiveness; should not mistrust, but forgiveness; should not be revenge, but forgiveness!

→ I know that's not the way our world operates today. If someone does something wrong, immoral or even evil, our world's instant response is to grind them into dust – fire them, get even, banish them, cancel them, send them packing. And far too often; far too quickly we Christians agree.

→ But what the cross announces to us is that Jesus is the one who has already paid the price for every sin committed. Because of Him, we are no longer subject to God's wrath against our sins. And that means that no one should be subject to our wrath whenever they come to us confessing their sins. When that happens, the first words out of our mouths must be the same as Jesus' words, "I forgive you!" In Christ, because the sin is no more, there is nowhere for our anger, revenge, or ill-will to go but away into thin air; "as far as the east is from the west," says Psalm 103:12.

✘ But let's be honest folks, this concept of forgiveness can still be hard for us to get our minds around - especially when we see sinful behavior again and again and again. It seems it was hard for Jesus' disciples to comprehend too. We get a glimpse of their struggle when Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" (Mat. 18:21). Peter felt like there had to be some kind of limit. But Jesus shocked him and the rest of us by saying just the opposite, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times" – a clever way of saying there is no limit to the number of times we are to

forgive someone else (Mat. 18:23). In other words, forgiveness should always be in our hearts and on our lips.

- ✘ Jesus' cross shows us that forgiveness is never just some passing fancy or something we only do now-and-then and only toward those whom we love. No, forgiveness from the cross is forever. In fact, it is something that is already accomplished; something that can never be taken away from us; something at the very core of every Christian's everyday life! because even though Christ defeated sin on the cross, sin still exists in this world until Jesus returns on the Last Day and takes us to heaven where sin will be no more.

➔ So for now, the only way to combat sin is with Christ's forgiveness from His cross. It is His gift of forgiveness that sets us free from sin every day; every time we confess our sins to God, trusting in Jesus as our Savior.

- ✘ Throughout Scripture Jesus showed us that forgiveness is always the top priority. When the paralyzed man was lifted down into the house where Jesus was teaching, the first thing Jesus did was forgive the man's sins – then He healed him of his paralysis. He let the woman caught in adultery go without physical punishment. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus taught that we are to show mercy to our fellow travelers on this road of life, just as God has shown us such great mercy by forgiving our many sins.

- ✘ Without hesitation Jesus spent time with "sinners" and those considered to be outcasts by the religious snobs. He said he came not for those who were well but for those who were sick. Throughout His ministry Jesus defaulted to helping those whom society considered to be "sinful".

➔ Remember Zacchaeus, the tax collector that overcharged people for their taxes to the Roman government? When Jesus came into Zacchaeus' town, Jesus sought him out; asking to come to his home. And when Zacchaeus responded to Jesus' love and forgiveness by promising to pay back all he had overcharged, Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Lk. 19:9-10). Forgiveness – it is Jesus' central teaching and purpose. It is THE primary teaching; THE most essential point in Scripture!

- ✘ Jesus came to bring salvation to the least and the lost. And who are the least and the lost? Well, every one of us, of course. As Romans 3:23 tells us, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". That means that all are in need of forgiveness.

➔ But knowing that Jesus is present in our lives and knowing that He went to the cross for us, guides us to align our lives to the ministry values of Christ Himself. It leads each one of us to ask, "Who are those I can forgive today – even those I'm not that eager to forgive?" Dear Christian, go to them this week, and forgive them.

➔ The second question is this: "Who are those I need to ask forgiveness from, for something unchristian that I did toward them?" Don't put it off. Go to them this week, confess your sin and ask for their forgiveness. You see, huge weights of guilt and shame can be lifted from our shoulders when we share and receive forgiveness.

- ✘ Christians have used a variety of rituals or methods to help us see and remember the very real power of forgiveness in our lives. We wrote our sins on those tags tonight and nailed them to the cross to remind us that Jesus took our sins upon Himself on the cross. Some people write their sins on small pieces of paper and then burn them or rip them up and throw them away. Others use various kinds of washing, which captures the cleansing effect of forgiveness, for it is in baptism that we are cleansed of our sins in Christ each day; cleansed through His blood shed for us on the cross. Like dirt that falls from our bodies when we bathe, so the filth of our sin falls away from us when we are drenched in the message of salvation in Christ Crucified.

→ In fact, by Jesus' death, we now wear the robe of His righteousness placed upon us at baptism. Death no longer frightens us. The end of this earthly life now serves only as the doorway to a life that will be renewed and restored by Jesus. For those who are forgiven in Jesus there is no fear in death; no dread in looking to the cross where Jesus died. No, we look death in the face and we say with Paul, "Where is your sting, O death". We turn our eyes directly to the cross and we sing, "In the cross of Christ I glory!"

- ✘ This year in Lent, dear people, let us be guided to the cross; be guided to Jesus; be guided to forgiveness. He is the one who guides you and me to salvation in a Savior who never gives up, never turns away from you; never stops loving you! Amen.