

August 6, 2023

The Gospel of Luke
LXVIII. For They Know Not What They Do
Luke 23:26-43

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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. And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Jesus once told a story about a young man who decided that his life, his true life, just had to lie somewhere else, in a different place and among a different crowd. So he asked his father for his share of the inheritance – oblivious, it would seem, to how hurtful such a request would be to his father who was, obviously, not yet dead. But such was the power of this young man's vision, this dream of what his life could be. His father gave him the money – and off went the young man in pursuit of that much better life.

For a while, it was great – everything he had hoped for. The fun was never-ending, the wine was ever-flowing – he was having the time of his life. But then his money ran out – and with it, so did the fun. He found himself now scrounging through the garbage pails for food, envious of the pigs at the pig farm because he could see that they were eating better than he was. Eventually he hit rock bottom.

And that's when it dawned on him. The way Jesus tells the story, "*He came to himself*" – although we might just as well read that as, "*He came to his senses.*" But maybe the best reading of all is simply something like this: he suddenly realized that, despite all the bravado and excitement with which his journey had begun, as it turned out, he had had not the slightest clue as to what he was doing. And even now, sitting with the pigs, realizing that he had no real idea of how to make sense of what had happened to him, nor how to get himself out of this mess. Save for one rather last-ditch, Hail Mary idea: to go back to that one place where his life had made sense. To go home to his father and see if his father might forgive him and let him back in the house. To say to his father, "*Father, forgive me, for I knew not what I was doing.*" And then just hope and pray that his father would prove merciful to such a wayward son.¹

Actually, there are a lot of stories like that one in the Bible – as if, maybe, the Bible were trying to tell us something about the basic fundamental human condition here on earth. Stories where somebody, or some people even, by some catastrophe or distress are brought to the point of realizing that they too know not what they are doing, and so must throw themselves on the mercy of their heavenly Father. Indeed, the Bible begins with just such a story – a story which the Bible

clearly understands to be, powerfully and profoundly, the story of everybody ever. It concerns our Biblical parents, Adam and Eve. At the beginning of the story, everything about life, their lives, was perfect just as they were and just where they were. All they had to do to know perfect joy and perfect peace each day was just to wake up in the morning and enjoy the goodness of their Maker, and fall asleep each night into the protection and peace of their God.

But one day a serpent came along and whispered something rather provocative and enticing into their ears. The serpent told them that life could be even better for them if they would just take control over their own lives and quit being so dependent on God. That they could chart their own course through the day and through the world. They could decide for themselves what was right and what was wrong – they didn't have to just take God's Word for it any longer. And Adam and Eve, who had suddenly developed what the Bible elsewhere refers to as a serious case of "itching ears," then decided that all this sounded pretty good. And so they did just as the serpent had tempted them to do – to be their own boss for a change, to run their own lives their own way for a change.

But no sooner had they done so – well, indeed, everything instantly changed for them. But it turned out to be nothing at all like the serpent had described it to be. Instantly they began to realize that what they had done had not made their lives better at all – but, rather, a whole lot worse. Not a win, but a great big loss. Because throwing off God in order to live life on their own terms turned out to be something which only made them suddenly feel very vulnerable, very afraid, and very lost in the world. The Bible says that their eyes were opened in that moment, and that the first thing they saw was that they were naked. But the Bible isn't talking about the fact that they weren't wearing any clothes – rather that's just the Biblical way, a symbolic way, of saying that they suddenly realized that when they had done what they had just done, they knew not what they were doing. They knew not what they were doing at all. And that now things had been royally messed up in their world – for them and, as it turned out, for everyone who would follow in the ages to come. They had taken perfect joy, perfect peace, perfect life and thrown it all away on a serpent's dare.² Clearly they did not know what they were doing.

And speaking of those royally messed up ages to come, as we read our passage this morning, we see that what it had all finally come down to was this: Jesus crucified. The human story had gone so wrong, we had gotten so lost, that when the Father sent the Son to find us, to fix our situation, to create a path for all of us prodigals to come home on – and note well, that, unlike in that story Jesus had told, the Father had come looking for us rather than we heading home looking for the Father. That now it had all come down to this, this whole human history of having thrown off God and thereby losing every clue as to what our lives are really for and how to live them – having thrown off God, that when He comes down to save us, what do we decide to do? We put Him on a cross to die a shameful, degrading, painful death. We put the Son of God, our Savior, on a cross to die.

That's what we collectively – not just Pilate or the Roman soldiers or the mocking crowds or jeering religious leaders – not just them, but all of us ever born with them, in that moment decided that killing Jesus was the best and smartest thing we could do. Put the Son of God, our Creator and our Savior, on a cross and watch Him die. The supreme illustration in all of history of the Biblical truth which Jesus then pronounces from that cross – that we know not what we are

doing. Then and there, at that place called the Skull, but also pretty much here, there, and everywhere in this world of ours, in these lives of ours – that we know not what we are doing.

But in Jesus' statement from the cross, we see another Biblical truth, closely related to that first one: which is that it is not until we are able to acknowledge that first truth, that it is not until we are willing and able to confess this about ourselves – that, in trying to run the show ourselves and by ourselves, we know not what we are doing in relation to God, the world, and everything in between – it is not until we are willing and able to acknowledge and confess that we are basically lost in life and captive to Sin that the full meaning of what Jesus says on that cross can come home to us. That the full meaning of why Jesus willingly went to that cross can come to life in us. It is not until we come to the point of truly understanding this about ourselves – that when it comes to the great matters of life and death and everything in between, and most especially in relation to God our Maker, that we know not what we do – then and only then can we hear the full meaning of His prayer to the Father: “*Forgive them.*” Forgive them. Forgive them. Father, they know not what they do – forgive them. Forgive them for this and for everything else along with it.

My theology teacher, John Leith, later in his life and later in his brilliant teaching career, wrote these very wise words in his book entitled, Basic Christian Doctrine:

There are brief moments in life, especially when we are young, when we feel no need for God who forgives our sins and redeems our life from destruction. Our personal endowments enable us to exult in the freedom of the secular cities; our rationalizations easily convince us of our own righteousness. But those moments are brief. Health breaks down; hopes are unfulfilled; the limits of our willpower become painfully clear. Finally we become aware that the achievements in which we have invested so much of our lives were possibly not worth the cost, or that our involvement is not so free of self-interest as once we imagined. Sooner or later we discover that life is an uphill battle, which in the end every person loses.³

Sooner or later, we come to realize that, while we have hopefully tried our best – we really have just been making it up as we went along. We knew not what we were doing when we hurt people we never intended to hurt, messed up so many things even when our intentions were good, just plain and in so many ways have not gotten things right. We knew not what we were doing – and nowhere more so than in our relationship with God.

And it is only in that confession – that confession, in one form or another, that we know not what we do – that the full meaning and power of Jesus' statement from the cross can come into us and bring us into salvation, bring us back into that right relationship with God we were always meant to have, bring us back into the way it was always supposed to be for us in these lives of ours. The full meaning and power of the fact that Jesus, from the cross, not only says, “*they know not what they do*” – but also, “*Father, forgive them.*” Forgive them. After everything we have done to Him and done to one another and even to ourselves – “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*” And then the full meaning and power of that fact that so the Father did. And

so the Father still does. In Jesus Christ, whatever it is, whatever we have been or whatever we have done – we are forgiven. We are forgiven. We are saved. And we are given life anew – life the way it was always supposed to be.

Listen to Paul writing to the Ephesians – for this is what happened for us in Jesus, in Jesus dying upon that cross:

It wasn't so long ago that you were mired in that old stagnant life of sin. You let the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. We all did it, all of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat. It's a wonder God didn't lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us. Instead, immense in mercy and with an incredible love, he embraced us. He took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ. He did all this on his own, with no help from us! Then he picked us up and set us down in highest heaven in company with Jesus, our Messiah.

Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus. Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it.⁴

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And that’s just exactly what the Father did. That’s just precisely what has now become possible for us in the death of our Lord upon His cross. Amazing grace.

Some years ago, the noted journalist Bill Moyers made a film about that beloved hymn, “Amazing Grace.” The film includes one scene which was shot at Wembley Stadium in London, at a rock concert celebrating the end of apartheid in South Africa. It is a scene not easy to forget once you have seen it. For some reason, the promoters had scheduled the great opera singer, Jessye Norman, to close out the program. For twelve hours rock groups have been riling up a crowd of seventy thousand, a crowd already riled up by alcohol and drugs. And then comes time for Jessye Norman to go out on stage and close out the concert by singing “Amazing Grace”:

A single circle of light follows Norman . . . as she strolls onstage. No backup band, no musical instruments, just Jessye. The crowd stirs, restless. Few recognize the opera diva. A voice yells for more Guns ‘n’ Roses. Others take up the cry. The scene is getting ugly.

Alone, a capella, Jessye Norman begins to sing, very slowly:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found—
Was blind, but now I see.

A remarkable thing happens in Wembley Stadium that night. Seventy thousand raucous fans fall silent before her aria of grace.

By the time Norman reaches the second verse, “’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, And grace my fears relieved . . .” the soprano has the crowd in her hands.

By the time she reaches the third verse, “’Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, And grace will lead me home,” several thousand fans are singing along, digging far back in nearly lost memories for words they heard long ago.

When we’ve been there ten thousand years
Bright shining as the sun,
We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise
Than when we first begun.

Jessye Norman later confessed she had no idea what power descended on Wembley Stadium that night. [We] know. The world thirsts for grace. When grace descends, the world falls silent before it.⁵

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And He did. And He does so still today – no matter what we have done. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son . . .”⁶ So that we who know that we have been lost might indeed at last be found. So that we who know that we have been blind might indeed at last truly see. So that we who have come to know that we do not know what we are doing, might indeed receive in Jesus Christ the Way, and the Truth, and the Life⁷ we so desperately need, and by which we find our heart’s true home. And in which we encounter our deepest and never-ending delight.

Amazing grace, that is what we see on the cross. And that is what we hear when our Savior prays, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

¹ Luke 15:11-24.

² Genesis 3:1-24.

³ John H. Leith, Basic Christian Doctrine (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), p. 180.

⁴ Ephesians 2:1-9, as translated in Eugene H. Peterson, The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 2127.

⁵ Philip Yancey, What’s So Amazing About Grace? (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), p. 282.

⁶ John 3:16.

⁷ John 14:6.