Ash Wednesday
First Word from the Cross
West Henrietta - 1962

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IN NOMINE JESU

St. Luke 23: 34 Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.

Week after week we confess in the Apostles' Creed: He suffered under Pontius Pilate. Yet, we are not always mindful of the great shame, degradation, and pain that lies hidden behind these few simple words. It started late Thursday night when the chief priests and elders and soldiers, led by Judas, came and captured Jesus near the Garden of Gethsemane. In woeful and rapid succession they condemned Him in six unjust trials, crowned Him with a crown of thorns, beat Him over the head spit in His face and mocked Him, scourged Him unmercifully, forced Him to carry His Cross, and when they finally reached the hill of Calvary, they crucified Him.

They crucified Him! There was no more horrible way of putting a man to death. It was the manner reserved for the slaves and criminals. So terrible it was that by decree of the government no Roman citizen was ever to be put to death by crucifixion. Picture, if you can, what happened. The Cross was laid on the ground. Jesus was stripped of his garments. With His head aching from the crown of thorns and His back sore and lacerated from the scourging, He was stretched out over the Cross. In gleeful laughter the rough and hardened soldiers drove the nails through His sacred hands and feet - and having done their cruel deed, they lifted up the cross and set it in place that He might die there.

You and I would have cried and groaned in an agony of pain; unbelievers would have cried and cursed. But Jesus gasped in prayer: Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. You and I would have thought of ourselves, would have looked for a way of escape or at least prayed for a quick and sudden death. But, even in the midst of that deep agony and pain, Jesus' first thoughts were for others .... for those who so cruelly and shamefully hurt Him. His first prayer was not for Himself - not even for His friends. He was praying for His enemies. And He wasn't praying for vengeance. He wasn't praying for their punishment. He was praying for their forgiveness.

Beautifully He pleads their cause: Father, forgive them, Even now, I am making sacrifice for them. They know not what they do. Surely they knew that they

were crucifying and hurting Christ. But they didn't realize that they were actually crucifying the Son of God. They didn't realize how deeply they were hurting Christ ..... a matter which men - you and I - never seem to realize. We speak of our littl sins. When we are lazy, when we are jealous, when we are stingy and selfish, when we get angry and lose our temper, when we neglect church attendance and other services to Christ, we perhaps realize that we have sinned, but so often we do not realize how deeply we have cut and hurt Christ through these sins. How true it it, we still know not what we do!

Father, forgive them! Who? Jesus wasn't thinking just of the soldiers. He was praying for all who had caused His death. He was praying for Judas, the traitor, who betrayed Him for thirty pieces of silver. He was praying for the priests and elders who, because of their jealousy and envy, wanted His death. He was thinking of the proud, hardened soldiers who had crowned Him with thorns, spit upon Him and mocked Him. He was thinking of Pilate, who had ordered His death to save his position. He was thinking of all those who had stood in the crowd and shrieked at the top of their voices: Crucify Him, crucify Him! For all of them He pleaded: Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do!

Do you know what I like mos t about that prayer? What I like most is the fact that Jesus included you and me. He prayed for all who were the cause of His death. You and I, too, caused His death. Yes we did - just as surely as if we had been there. He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. Our sins helped drive those nails through His sacred hands and feet. With our sins of today we are still doing it. Yet, in His deep love, He still prays: Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.

I ask you - was there ever love like that! This story is told about the death of Princess Alice of England. Her little daughter was critically ill with diphtheria. The doctor forbade the mother to kiss the girl since she would thereby almost certainly contact the disease. In one of her spells of delirium, the mother picked up the girl, pressed her to her bosom, and soothed her. When the little girl

regained consciousness, she sobbed: Mommy, kiss me! Without stopping to think of what it might cost, she kissed her daughter. Before many days had passed, the child had recovered, but the mother was dead. A mother's love is always deep.

The love of Jesus is even deeper. Even though we were His enemies, He didn't ask what the cost might be! For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly, Is it any wonder that those of us who know Him should love Him? A man stood in an art gallery gazing at a painting of the crucifiec Savior. Finally, he sighed aloud: I love Him, my Savior! Another man, standing close by, heard the confession, put his arm on the man's shoulder and said: Brother, I, too, love Him. Before long, almost all who had come to view the painting of the Chucified stood united in silent confession: I love Him, my Savior! As I look at the Crucified tonight, and hear Him pray for me: Father, forgive them, I want you to know that I love Him, my Savior! I pray that every one of you will join me in silent confession: I love Him, too, my Savior!

If you love Him, why not serve Him? Serve Him in love! Jesus spoke much about love - of loving our neighbors as ourselves, of loving our enemies, of doing good to those who sin against us. Jesus practiced what He preached. He loved His neighbors more than Himself. He even loved His enemies with the sincerest of love. When they reviled Him, He reviled not again. When they cursed Him, He blessed them. When they crucified Him, He prayed for them.

We, too, speak much about love. We read about it constantly in our newspapers and magazines. Talk about love & prepare for war! Yet how hard we sometimes find it to practice what we preach. We are tempted to repay evil with evil - to get even. We are inclined to carry a grudge rather than to forgive those who have done us hurt. Some people even let such a flimsy little thing as a hurt feeling keep them from church and the Lord's Supper. Yet Jesus had much more than a hurt feeling when He prayed: Father, forgive them.

The art of love and forgiveness must be learned at the foot of the Cross. That is where Stephen obtained the strength, so that when they stoned him to death,

he prayed in love: Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. It was at the foot of the Cross that John Hus learned the art of forgiveness and love, so that when they raised him on the stake and the flames and smoke began to choke him, he prayed: Lord Jesus, forgive my enemies; forgive them for Your mercy's sake!

Spring is a time for housecleaning. Lent is a time for heart cleaning. How clean is your heart? Did your parents mistreat you? Have your friends neglected you? Have your brothers and sisters wronged you? Did someone slander and insult you? Did your pastor or some church officer offend you and hurt you? Has your husband or your wife misused you? Have you suffered any other kind of injury? As long as we are sinners living among sinners, we ought to expect others from time to time to sin against us. Since you aren't perfect, why should you expect others to be perfect? We Christians forgive one another, as God, for Christ's sake, has forgive us. Cast out, then, all hatreds and grudges that have soured your life, and show love to one another.

A loveless life is a living death. He who refuses to forgive others, breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass to reach heaven. When you find it difficult to love, to forgive, then hurry to the foot of Calvary, kneel down and listen as your Savior prays: Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do -- and renenber that He is praying for YOU!

Amen.