

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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Series: CROSS WORDS

Sermon: "Father Forgive Them"

Luke 23:32-34 (NIV)

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. 33 When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. 34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

Sermon:

If you follow highway 101 down the Oregon Coast, one of the last town you hit before you get to the wastelands of California is Brookings. I've never heard of Brookings, and I've never heard of one of its most fascinating stories until recently. But you probably know a little bit about its history. In World War II, the Japanese poked the proverbial Tiger with its attack on Pearl Harbor, and the U.S. Pacific Fleet got about the business going after its new adversary island by island. In an effort to get the Pacific Fleet to back off from its offensives, the Japanese tried different means to get the fleet back to the West Coast, to play defense. I did not know this history, but many of you lived it. There was the fiasco of the explosive balloons that were let loose in Japan, carried on the jet stream across the ocean, one landed here in Oregon, and killed a few unfortunate folk who went to go investigate what had landed. Five kids and a pregnant woman out on a church outing in Bly, Oregon. There were the reports of submarines patrolling our coast. Every night for a few of these war years, major port cities turned out their lights so the enemy couldn't get its bearings or target the US under the cover of darkness. But the story I never heard of was that of Nobuo Fujita. He was an officer in the Japanese Navy, and the Imperials found a way to launch a float plane by Submarine. Fujita actually came up with the idea, and asked if he could fly a plane over the mainland, drop incendiary bombs to start horrible forest fires, and shock the conscience of the American people. On September 9, 1942, a few months after his sub shelled the military fort in Astoria, the daring plan was put into motion. They quickly assembled the plane from their parts in storage and off he went, towards the coastal range. This is how the New York Times covered the story, years later: the crew assembled the plane and shot it into the air with a catapult. Mr. Fujita, oriented himself with the Cape Bianco lighthouse and flew over the coastal range, dropping two 168-pound fire bombs over the forests in the hope of setting terrible forest fires.

Mr. Fujita's plane had been spotted from the ground, but no one had anything better to shoot at it with other than a deer rifle, and so he flew back to the submarine -- and was horrified to discover that it was not there. He feared that it had been discovered and forced to leave him behind, but he eventually found it and landed in the water on the plane's floats.

The submarine's crew members quickly stowed the plane and dived to 250 feet, where they stayed quietly -- listening to American depth charges -- as the United States Navy searched frantically for them.

Three weeks later, Mr. Fujita flew an almost identical mission and dropped two more bombs. None of the bombings, on either mission, caused much of a fire, but they did provoke alarm up and down the coast.

Mr. Fujita's air raid was regarded in Japan as heroic. The main front-page article in the Asahi newspaper's evening edition on Sept. 17, 1942, carried a headline: "Incendiary Bomb Dropped on Oregon State. First Air Raid on Mainland America. Big Shock to Americans."

I've never heard that story. I assumed that the war was over there, and not over here. Didn't realize that they hit the mainland. I'll finish the story a little later, this is my Paul Harvey impression. You'll have to wait to hear the rest of the story.

Why did I bring all of that up? I'll be honest. I shouldn't be preaching a sermon about forgiveness. I know I'm a pastor, and I've probably preached forgiveness many times over the years, but my first-hand knowledge of true forgiveness is truly lacking. From a human kind kinda standpoint, my need for forgiveness from anybody is a pittance, and I hope that my need to offer forgiveness to anybody is also nil. Truly, no one has ever hurt me so much that I brood about it for decades. No one has ever killed anyone in my family. I'm not maimed, no one has ever tried to sabotage my career, stolen my car, torched my house. No one has ever violated my body. Or robbed me at gunpoint. I'm guessing that my wife hasn't cheated, or the FBI has a file on me, or that I'm going to go to jail for a crime I haven't committed. My life sounds pretty easy! My need to offer someone forgiveness is low. If I were to write a blues song, the most it could be would be something like:

SING BLUES STYLE: I woke up this morning, an hour too early, and I can't fall back asleep, and now I've got the early morning bathroom blues. . . .It's not going to sell a lot of copies.

SING BLUES STYLE: I went to the fridge, to get me some milk. But it smelled a little funky, it was three days over the date and I debated whether or not if it was healthy enough to drink or if I should just go to the store and get new milk, blues.

But I know that some of you have stories where you have been hurt. Where you have been robbed. Lied to. Cheated on. Violated. Falsely accused. Where there is a person or people out there that has truly done you wrong. So there may be more qualified folk in this room to share about the power of offering forgiveness.

On the flip side, as far as I know, I haven't truly messed over anybody to a degree that would merit lifetime wrath and scorn. Oh, I've made a few mistakes, but I haven't ruined anybody's life just yet. Granted, we're getting into the teenage years, so there's still a chance. I've lost a friendship or two because of my mistakes. I remember guest preaching for a friend at a Saturday Night Service, and at the end of the service telling the small congregation that they should ask him how his date was, he was out on a date. But apparently he told them that he was at a conference or something, which was why they had a guest preacher - caught him in the lie, and he got a lot of flack. I should have just kept my big mouth shut. Do you ever have those moments where you wish you could replay a conversation, have a do-over for the evening, and stop yourself from messing up? Or causing injury or harm? Some of us rehash that even years later. That's what regret is. We all have regrets of some kind, some bigger than others. I love the etymology of the word Regret. Re, to do again, or to meet. And the other form is European, the French have it to weep or to mourn, the Germans have it as the dead. To meet the dead. Regret. To meet, to remember, the dead, the things you cannot change. Again, I've had a few regrets, but not too terrible many.

But I know that some of you have stories where you have hurt others. Maybe some by accident, maybe some on purpose. Where there is a person or people out there that you have truly done wrong. So there may be more qualified folk in this room who could share about the need for forgiveness.

As Jesus was hanging on the cross, he shared a few words that were picked up by the Gospel Writers. As they gambled for his clothing at the base of the cross, he asked for God to forgive them, for they know not what they do. This is where we are in the story: Peter and the other disciples, save John, already left. Peter already denying him. betrayal by Judas, two criminals hanging on each side throwing their taunts in, but after a while, the taunting dies down. And the condemned get on the business of just die already. The soldiers, rough hewn, who lifted the bodies to the beams, nailed them in, and now sat wait, bored, ready for the day to be over. And they rolled dice to see who would get the clothes of the executed. They are doing what they are paid to do. Just

following orders. In response to all that happened, Jesus speaks words that strangely carry no anger, no call for revenge, nor any final blessing for his followers to hear. Just the words: "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." One of his last acts was to ask his Father in heaven to give forgiveness. That is forgiveness I do not know that I could give. And I pray I am never tested like that. But that is why these stories are important. That is why we need to remember this kind of love. Lent is a time to examine our lives, our character, our personalities - can we have a love like this? Lord, I am but a humble sinner. Don't have great sins, but sins enough that I need your forgiveness - to make right what was wrong. If we don't seek, or give forgiveness, then we meet and carry the dead with us - regret. Digging up stuff that should have been buried long ago.

And so I think back to Officer Fujita, who, as far as we know, has been the only enemy person to bomb the US Mainland in an act of war. After the war, he started a hardware store. But the war never left him, or for many in that generation, or any generation after bloodshed. In the early 1960's, he wanted to make things right. Again, from the Times: A quiet, humble man who in his later years was deeply ashamed of his air raids on the United States, Mr. Fujita eventually forged a remarkable bond of friendship with the people of Brookings, the small logging town whose surrounding forests he had bombed. On his first postwar visit to Brookings in 1962, Mr. Fujita carried with him a 400-year-old samurai sword that had been handed down in his family from generation to generation. He presented the sword, which he had carried with him throughout the war, to Brookings as a symbol of his regret. Truth is, he had been very anxious before that visit, fretting about whether Oregonians would be angry at him for the bombing, and so he had decided to carry the sword so that if necessary he could appease their fury by committing ritual suicide, disemboweling himself with the sword. Mr. Fujita's grandson said his grandfather had been deeply moved that the people of Brookings treated him hospitably, showering him with affection and respect that he felt he did not deserve. From this remarkable mutual magnanimity, Mr. Fujita began the metamorphosis from an enemy bomber of Brookings to its honorary citizen. "He gave \$1,000 to the library to purchase books about Japan for children, so that there wouldn't be another war between the United States and Japan," Said the Mayor of Brookings, "He was always very humble and always promoting the idea of peace between the United States and Japan."

Churches and businesses in Brookings contributed \$3,000 to pay for Mr. Fujita's trip to Oregon in 1962, and when he could afford to, he responded by paying for several local people to visit Japan. He also made three more visits to Brookings over the years, planting trees to mark the spot where he dropped the bombs and taking part in a 1994 ceremony to dedicate a state historical marker near the site. When he passed away in 1997, he was made an honorary citizen of Brookings, the town he bombed. His ashes were sprinkled around the trees he planted at the bomb site. Forgiveness asked, forgiveness received.

I have seen the power and devastation of regret, and it is real and powerful. But I have also seen the power of forgiveness, given and received, and it is real and more powerful. If you need forgiveness today, seek it out. If you need to offer forgiveness, think about it, pray about it. You are meeting the dead over and over again. And in the end, may we have enough strength and fortitude to say, "Forgive them, Father, they know not what they do." Or "Forgive me, Father, I know not what I do." May you find, and give, the power of forgiveness this Lenten season. Amen.