

## EASTER V

*While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, ‘Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, ‘God, do not hold this sin against them. ‘When he had said this, he died. Acts 7: 59-60*

That’s in the reading from the Book of Acts we just heard.

*Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. 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. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. Luke 23:34*

That, of course, is from the Passion Gospel, in this case, Luke’s Gospel. If Stephen’s last words sound eerily similar to Jesus’, it’s no accident. Luke — whoever *Luke* was— is the author of Acts as well as the Gospel attributed to him. Like Jesus, Stephen prays to God to forgive those who are killing him.

It’s not surprising that Stephen prays. He’s filled with the Holy Spirit, Luke tells us, he has a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and he fully expects to join them momentarily in Paradise. He’s about to be martyred for his faith. Of course he prays.

But what he prays for is extraordinary. He prays for his enemies and persecutors at the moment of their apparent triumph over him. He does not blame his executioners, and he does not express regret for his untimely death. Rather, he prays to God to forgive his killers, just as Jesus does.

That's Stephen's depth of piety and spiritual strength. He can pray for those who are about to take his life, for their forgiveness, for their salvation.

I heard my friend Cathy George preach the Seven Last Words on Good Friday, and she had some remarkable things to say about *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*. She said, *notice that Jesus does not forgive his executioners himself, exactly. He asks God to do it*. And I think, perhaps it was too much for Jesus just then, to forgive those who were torturing him. He knows his human capacity, and maybe forgiveness was just beyond him at this point. So he gives it to God.

Cathy said, *we can do this too*. Think of someone whom you just can't seem to forgive, and ask God to do it for you. Pray to God for the forgiveness you can't find in yourself.

I tried to do it, then and there, and I've kept trying since, with someone who's hurt me deeply and at whom I'm very angry. God may have forgiven her; I'm sure God has, but I haven't, yet. I think if I said this prayer conscientiously enough, and authentically enough, long enough, it would probably work. But, I have to confess, it hasn't yet. I haven't been freed of the burden of my resentment and suffering.

And that, I think, is the point of the prayer, the prayer of asking God to forgive those can't forgive ourselves: that eventually the prayer will work on us until we find forgiveness within ourselves. And, I hope, we all have time to pray such prayers over and over, unlike Jesus and Stephen who are on the point of death.

The other thing Jesus says—so provocative—*they don't know what they're doing*. *They don't know what they're doing*.

What can this mean? Of course they know what they're doing: they're crucifying him. It couldn't be any clearer, any more cruel, any more violent, this deliberate and entirely public execution. They know exactly what they're doing, and so does an entire crowd of witnesses.

We could argue that if Jesus is right, they don't know what they're doing, that lets them off the hook, in a way. Sometimes, when people injure us inadvertently, and we know they didn't have hurtful intentions, it's not so hard to forgive them. When the injury seems purposeful, that takes the challenge of forgiveness to another level of difficulty.

But in some sense, Jesus' killers and Stephen's killers don't know what they're doing. They don't understand that Jesus is the Son of God, what that means. They don't understand that Stephen is filled with love of Jesus and God and filled with the Holy Spirit. They don't understand this Good News that's infected the hearts of Jesus and his followers, the Good News that will change the world.

And so it probably is with those who hurt us, as well. They may not understand our vulnerability or our values. They may not understand their own motivations. They may *mean* to injure or anger or disrespect us, but I do believe that we are all driven by subconscious forces that we do not fully understand, and that when we strike out at others with hostile, hurtful words or deeds, we are operating from an unexamined, or at least unresolved, inner darkness.

I think this because I have, at bottom, a hopeful view of our human nature. I do believe most of us are trying, most of the time, to journey toward the light. And so, when we fall off that path of righteousness, often, we truly *do not know what we are doing*. If we understand that about

ourselves, we must give the same benefit of the doubt to others, until proven else wise.

I believe that forgiveness is one of the greatest of spiritual challenges. I know it's mine. I also know what makes forgiveness much, much easier: a heartfelt apology. I've been blessed on a number of occasions in the last year to receive full-throated, unconditional apologies from people who'd hurt me badly. Each time, I felt a great burden lift from my heart: a deep grace.

And then there's the one who hasn't apologized, and whom I'm trying—but maybe not trying hard enough—to ask God to forgive. The injury she did me festers: an open wound. She treated me in a way that was mean and foolish and entirely uncalled for, and did it most deliberately, in a bizarre and, really, demented email. I try to focus on the *demented* part—*she didn't know what she was doing*. But we have been friends for 40 years and she knows exactly how to hit me where it hurts. At the same time I know that she's a deeply damaged person, and I should not expect balanced behavior from her. *They don't know what they're doing*. But I have great difficulty staying with my awareness of her limitations and lack of self-understanding and self-control. I'm quite stuck with the intentionality of what she did, and with her unwillingness to acknowledge the impact it's had on me.

And I think my prayer, honestly, is that she will apologize, that she will ask my forgiveness. But that's not really giving the problem over to God; it's more prayer as attempted coercion, prayer as policy statement. And such prayers, I am afraid, do not demonstrate great spiritual depth. I don't have the spiritual maturity to say, with Jesus and Stephen, *God, forgive her, for she doesn't know what she's doing*.

That's why we have saints and martyrs, that's why we have Jesus. They walk before us, and around us, showing us the way to holiness, revealing the way to God. We are all on that journey. We are not as far along as they are. But we are on the way, and they are leading us into the light.

Alleluia! Amen