

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2010)

Joel in 2:12-17:

- ¹² “But even now,” says the LORD, “repent sincerely and return to me with fasting and weeping and mourning.
¹³ Let your broken heart show your sorrow; tearing your clothes is not enough.”
Come back to the LORD your God.
He is kind and full of mercy; he is patient and keeps his promise; he is always ready to forgive and not punish.
¹⁴ Perhaps the LORD your God will change his mind and bless you with abundant crops.
Then you can offer him grain and wine.
¹⁵ Blow the trumpet on Mount Zion; give orders for a fast and call an assembly!
¹⁶ Gather the people together; prepare them for a sacred meeting;
bring the old people; gather the children and the babies too.
Even newly married couples must leave their homes and come.
¹⁷ The priests, serving the LORD between the altar and the entrance of the Temple, must weep and pray:
“Have pity on your people, LORD.
Do not let other nations despise us and mock us by saying, ‘Where is your God?’”
¹⁸ Then the LORD showed concern for his land; he had mercy on his people.
¹⁹ He answered them:
“Now I am going to give you grain and wine and olive oil, and you will be satisfied.
Other nations will no longer despise you.

I John 1:5-9: ⁵Now the message that we have heard from his Son and announce is this: God is light, and there is no darkness at all in him. ⁶If, then, we say that we have fellowship with him, yet at the same time live in the darkness, we are lying both in our words and in our actions. ⁷But if we live in the light—just as he is in the light—then we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin. ⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us. ⁹But if we confess our sins to God, he will keep his promise and do what is right: he will forgive us our sins and purify us from all our wrongdoing.

John 3:16-21 ¹⁶For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its savior. ¹⁸Those who believe in the Son are not judged; but those who do not believe have already been judged, because they have not believed in God’s only Son. ¹⁹This is how the judgment works: the light has come into the world, but people love the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds are evil. ²⁰Those who do evil things hate the light and will not come to the light, because they do not want their evil deeds to be shown up. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light in order that the light may show that what they did was in obedience to God.

The first words that Jesus spoke from the cross, according to the Gospel of Luke, were “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” About whom was he talking? Who were the people at the foot of the cross who “knew not what they did”?

The soldiers knew what they were doing: They were doing their job, their assignment, what they had been hired to do. It may have been dirty work occasionally, but a job is a job. Jobs are not always the most palatable things to do. Sometimes we don’t have a choice. We have to do the dirty work and just try to make the best of it. Have you ever been in that spot? You knew what you were doing, even if you didn’t like it. The soldiers also knew what they were doing. But Jesus said, “They know not what they do.”

Pontius Pilate knew what he was doing too. He said, “This man has done nothing to deserve death.” And yet the situation was such that he just HAD to do ... well, what he HAD to do. He tried to find some way to cover up what he was doing by sending Jesus to Herod, washing his hands, making other people say that they were to blame. Pilate was doing what he felt could not be avoided. He did what he HAD to do. Have you ever been in that position? Sometimes you just have to do what you have to do. You know what you are doing, wrong as you know it is. Pilate knew what he was doing. But Jesus said “They know not what they do.”

Herod knew what he was doing. For once, Herod agreed with Pilate. He could find nothing in Jesus worthy of execution. And he sent him back to Pilate, saying, “I am returning him to you.” Ducking the issue ...providing an answer by finding a way not to answer. That was how Herod tried to cover up his own indecision, by finding a way to shift the responsibility for his action (or for lack of action) to someone else. Have you ever been in that spot? Let someone else shoulder the responsibility – pass that buck. You know what you are doing. Herod knew too. But Jesus said “They know not what they do.”

The religious leaders of the day knew what they were doing, too. They had to find a way to arrest Jesus, bring him to trial, stir up the crowds, twist Pilate’s arm, saying, “It is expedient that one man should die for the people.” Don’t rock the boat, keep the peace at all costs, do whatever will cause the least inconvenience for the most people, even if a few have to suffer. You know it’s not right, but that’s just the price you have to pay. You know what you are doing, and the religious leaders did, too. But Jesus said “They know not what they do.”

Simon Peter knew what he was doing when he denied his Lord, despite the warnings he received. Jesus told him, “Before the cock crows twice, three times you will deny me.” Maybe Peter was trying to save his own hide, biding his time for another opportunity to wave his sword. Have you ever backed away from a problem saying you are going to save your strength for another day, for another battle? And you knew what you were doing. Peter did too. But Jesus said “They know not what they do.”

Judas knew what he was doing when he betrayed his Lord for cash. The deed had been well plotted, well thought out, even to the kiss in Gethsemane. For the sake of money and its momentary rewards, Judas betrayed the Lord. Have you ever betrayed the Lord, putting your faith on the shelf, in order to receive some cash or other momentary reward? You knew what you were doing when you did it. Judas did too. But Jesus said “They know not what they do.”

Even the criminals crucified with Christ that day knew what they were doing: “We are receiving the due reward of our deeds,” one of them reminded the other. At this point, at least that one seemed to feel, there was no further need to cover over what was going on.

What all of them were doing, you may have noticed, and what we often do, is not so much the deed itself—as trying to justify it when it’s done, trying to find a way to make what is inherently WRONG somehow seem right, or not as bad as it really is, or as we sometimes say, “the lesser of two evils.” From Watergate and other more recent political scandals we learned the word COVER-UP, although the practice is as old as Adam and Eve. Remember when the Lord God sought them out in the garden and asked, “What have you DONE?” they tried to cover up their deed as well, didn’t they? Fig leaves, that time, and excuses and blaming each other. Adam and Eve knew what they had done.

Soldiers and Jewish leaders, Pilate and Herod, Peter and Judas, you and I – we all know what we are doing. But even while we are covering up—making our lives tolerable, safe, bearable, we are driving the loving, living, forgiving God away from ourselves.

Is it just a coincidence that Luke tells us “They divided his garments among them—” ...even as Jesus prays above them for their forgiveness and for ours. And is it just a coincidence that in the Hebrew language, one of the words for “garment”—for something to COVER what ought not to be seen—is the word that also means ATONEMENT? In Hebrew it is called, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the “day of covering.” “They divided HIS garments—” Perhaps it is just a coincidental detail, but it does provide a picture of what we are doing here today. We have come here today to divide among ourselves (not as a gamble, but in the certainty of Spirit-given faith) the covering—THE covering for all our sins.

May we be covered by the seamless robe of perfect righteousness for which Christ died. May we receive that full forgiveness for which Jesus prayed even as he gave his life to make it so.

Jesus said “They know not what they do.” May that not be true among us as Lent begins again, for we KNOW. We have not come to cover up our sins, but to let the atoning death of Jesus Christ cover all our sins. We know that what we have come to do is be forgiven.

“Father, forgive them.” Amen!