

## Wesley United Methodist Church

March 25, 2016

"Father, Forgive..."

Lord's Prayer, Psalm 22

On November 14, 1940, a squadron from the German Luftwaffe made its way across the English Channel, headed for the coast of England. Its mission was top secret and code-named "Operation Moonlight Sonata", and its goal was simple: to destroy the city of Coventry. Throughout the night the bombs rained down on that city, and in the early morning light, the extent of the damage was seen. Coventry had been devastated. 568 people had been killed; block after block had been leveled; and the beautiful cathedral, which had lifted its spire over Coventry for centuries, was now a smoldering pile of rubble.

Standing in the middle of the shell of the ruined cathedral only days after the bombing, Jack Forbes, the cathedral's stonemason, saw in the midst of the rubble, two of the medieval roof timbers that had fallen across each other--in the form of a cross. He tied the burnt fragments together and placed them in the ruined sanctuary.

Later that week, a priest, Rev. Arthur Wales, also picked up three of the huge medieval roof nails that littered the debris. He, too, bound them into the form of a cross and placed them with the charred cross.

Behind these symbols of destruction and hatred were inscribed just two words, **"Father Forgive."**

For me, one of the most difficult lines to pray in the Lord's prayer is:

**"And forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sinned against us."**

I know I'm not alone in that feeling, because one of the hardest things we are asked to do as Christians is to forgive. When we are hurt by another, or when there has been some injustice we have suffered, the human tendency is to hurt back--respond in anger--to lash out. And, in many ways, that's understandable. It's human. And yet...it's not the way of Christ.

As followers of the Son of God, we have been shown a different way of living--hard as that might be. For even after betrayal--and scourging--and torture, Jesus chose another path--the path of love over hatred, and forgiveness over revenge. He prayed, even as he was hanging on the cross,

**"Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing."** (Luke 23:34)

Difficult as it is, if we are to live by the faith we profess, then we must forgive.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, chair of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, in the midst of bringing healing to that country once said, "There is no future without forgiveness." It is only by moving beyond the hurt, the anger, and the hatred that we can truly move ahead. That doesn't mean that forgiveness comes easily. And eventually, again with God's help, forgiveness can become reality.

In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Forgiveness isn't an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude."

And so we pray: **"And forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sinned against us."**

In the summer of 1970 I was privileged to stand in the center of the bombed out shell of Coventry Cathedral. The shell remains--there are no windows--no ornaments--no roof--only the blackened remnants of the walls and the steeple. And, at the far end, an altar, the charred cross still in place, and the words, **"Father Forgive."** There is a new cathedral there, as well, with beautiful stained glass, towering ceilings and a magnificent organ. And yet the focal point of that cathedral is another altar with the roof nail cross in the center.

And from that devastation has grown an unbelievable ministry of peace. **"For Jesus is our peace, who has broken down the dividing wall of hostility..so that you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."** (Ephesians 2:14, 19)

The people of Coventry could find peace and forgiveness because they truly understood the meaning of the cross. And through their ministry, they have literally changed a corner of their world, where "Coventrate" once meant to destroy, to much of the world, the word "Coventry" brings forth images of peace. They could do it, Jesus did it, so can we. "For Jesus is our peace."

Every Friday at noon, a service is held in Coventry's ruined sanctuary. Every Friday these Christians stop whatever they are doing and come together to pray. Today let us pray their litany of reconciliation with them.

Litany of Reconciliation

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

For the hatred which divides nation from nation, race from race, class from class...

**Father Forgive.**

For the covetous desires of people and nations to possess what is not their own...

**Father Forgive.**

For the greed which exploits the work of human hands and lays waste the earth...

**Father Forgive.**

For our envy of the welfare and happiness of others...

**Father Forgive.**

For our indifference to the plight of the imprisoned, the homeless, the refugees...

**Father Forgive.**

For the lust which dishonors the bodies of men, women, and children...

**Father Forgive."**

For the pride which leads us to trust in ourselves and not in God...

**Father Forgive.**

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

**Amen.**