

**“Father, forgive them...”  
By Adam H. Fronczek**

**This is the first in a series of Lenten sermons centering upon the seven last “words” of Jesus, spoken as he hung upon the cross.**

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Finally, they tracked him down—the man who had quietly performed a heroic deed on a train platform, and then disappeared. With the train just a short way from the stop and coming in fast, a man on the platform suddenly collapsed and fell onto the track. The hero, a 59-year-old man, showing the strength that comes only from a lifetime of hard work, climbed quickly down onto the track, hoisted the man to the height of his shoulders and set him back on the platform, jumping back up with only moments left to save himself. By the time the paramedics got to work on the collapsed man, the hero was gone. But they tracked him down, the man who had collapsed and his family, they found the address of the hero, and knowing that he did not wish to be found, they simply sent him a letter and a picture.

The picture was of “Three children, the oldest a teenager and the other [two around 8 or 9], they were sort of lying about in a pile, each with a water pistol and apparently laughing until they were practically screaming. Behind them stood a blond woman of about forty-five, with a wide grin and her arms stretched out like a large bird of prey and an overflowing plastic bucket in each hand. At the bottom of the pile lay the man [who had collapsed on the train platform]...wearing a blue polo shirt, and trying in vain to shield himself from the downpour.” The letter explained that his fall had been the result of “some complicated brain disease. If they hadn’t discovered it [in the accident] and started treating it when they did, it would have claimed his life within a few years.” So in a way, the life in that picture had been saved twice over. (Backman, *A Man Called Ove*, 312)

That story comes from a novel by the Swedish author Fredrik Backman. The title is *A Man Called Ove*. The book jacket summarizes it this way: “At first sight, Ove is almost certainly the grumpiest man you will ever meet, a curmudgeon with staunch principles, strict routines, and a short fuse. People think him bitter, and he thinks himself surrounded by idiots.” The book begins with a charming overview of Ove’s routine. He begins each day by patrolling his neighborhood for criminal activity that never happens, and recording the

license plate numbers of cars in the reserved parking area. Ove has active feuds with most of the members of the neighborhood association, even though he is no longer a member of it. Ove truly doesn't understand how you can reason with anyone who doesn't drive a Saab.

Ove is the hero in the story about the train, and lives a life filled with countless acts of quiet compassion and kindness, even though you would never know it to speak with him. As the book unfolds, we learn about Ove's life. We learn of his early loss of his mother and then his father; we learn of his highly principled and trusting financial decisions that twice led him into ruin; we learn of his brave decision in young adulthood to fall in love with a wonderful woman and let her into his heart; and of his grief and helplessness when she first suffers a terrible accident, and then is taken from him by cancer.

In the midst of Ove's deep grief and loss, a young mother moves in across the street — a woman who is a little more perceptive and patient than the rest of us -- and she does the work of slowly opening Ove's heart. She helps him and those around him rediscover that, though he has his flaws, Ove is a deeply generous and kind man. She slowly peels back the layers of pain and sadness that have surrounded his heart. She allows people to discover, and she allows Ove to rediscover about himself, that he is not just a curmudgeon; he is a beautiful human being.

The beauty of this novel is that it gently reveals to the reader the ignorant conclusions all of us draw, not only about the curmudgeons we may know, but all kinds of people we meet every day. Sure, there are jerks out there. But most folks really do have good intentions and are trying to do their best. It's just that every one of us carries grief and pain—unresolved baggage in our lives. And sometimes it causes us to be much more suspicious or protective or just anxious than we need to be toward other people. When we work to overcome these blind spots, we become closer to one another, and closer to the people God created us to be.

Jesus seems to understand well the sadness and innocence of our human misjudgments. Even when he is at death's door, hanging on the Cross, enduring pain and abuse that he does not deserve, Jesus is gracious enough to look at the people around him, the ones who have agreed to his suffering, and he prays to God on their behalf: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34)

That phrase is the first of Seven Last Words from the Cross we'll be thinking about over the 40 days of Lent. With all of the commonly held notions out there about Lent: about giving up drinking or chocolate or four-letter words, one sometimes gets the idea that Lent is a season of guilt—a time to dwell on the

shortcomings in our life we know all about. Yet this first word from the Cross reminds us of a much different idea: For many of us, sin—the things that separate us most from God and from one another—quite often takes the form of the broken relationships that happen not out of intention, but out of ignorance, almost by accident. We see it in interactions with people like Ove—the grumpy neighbor or co-worker we have decided is our enemy because we didn't realize he was hurting so deeply. We see it in judgments we make about people who suffer visibly: the homeless person...who has PTSD from heroic military service, and following an honorable discharge he just hasn't been able to manage life as a civilian. We commit accidental sins of ignorance even toward our spouse or siblings, or a parent or child we just haven't worked hard enough to understand. We don't sin against these people intentionally; we find ourselves separated from them because of things we just don't understand. Often, when we treat people the worst and feel the most rotten about it afterwards, it wasn't because they deserved it or because we wanted it that way; it was just out of our ignorance, and the misunderstandings that arise between human beings.

Jesus knew that he was misunderstood by those who stood at the foot of the Cross and watched him dying. He knew that many of them did not know him as the great healer, the wise teacher, certainly not the Son of God—no, to them he was just a common criminal. Both the civil and the religious authorities had labeled him as a menace to society. So they went along with popular opinion, and out of their ignorance, they allowed his death, all because he spent a bit too much time challenging the status quo, and talking about acceptance, grace, and love.

Importantly, Lent does not begin with this moment of Jesus on the Cross, but with a much different story. At the beginning of this 40-day season leading up to Easter, we often tell a story of Jesus from earlier days. Before his ministry begins, one of the first stories of Jesus' life is of how he spent 40 days alone in the desert, days of prayer and fasting, during which he prepared his heart and mind for the rigors that were ahead of him. In Jesus' life, people would meet him with anger and suspicion. On the best days they would laugh at him for being naïve; on the worst one they would sentence him to death for crimes he did not commit. Only because of his intense and constant life of reflection and preparation could he meet these misguided adversaries and refuse to treat them like enemies. Only because of his preparations could he look down from the Cross and say, "Father, forgive them, for they know do not know what they are doing."

All of this seems worth talking about if you want to cultivate an awareness of the Ove's in your life—the people who really need care, compassion, and support, but may not know how to ask for it. You may even need to discover

that, even in some small way, you have become an Ove—that your unresolved baggage has turned you inward, made you suspicious, and buried your finest gifts beneath a thick layer of anger or sadness or fear.

Well, in order to come to terms with challenges such as these, we all need our own times of preparation. That is the essence of Lent. This is a season each year during which we are reminded, through our own period of prayer or fasting or whatever disciplines you may choose, that if we choose to prepare ourselves, God may give us a tremendous gift in these 40 days. God may be seeking to open our hearts in a way we do not expect, if only we are open to receiving that gift.

This morning we begin our Lent together at the Communion table. As you hear the music, as you pray, as you receive the elements, consider today what else God might wish for you to receive in these 40 days of Lent. Perhaps for someone in your life or even for yourself, God is seeking to open your heart and your life. Perhaps through this season of preparation, you may learn anew the meaning of forgiveness, grace, and love.

Amen.