

**Sermon – Seven Last Words of Christ**  
**Word #2**  
**Good Friday - Luke 23:39-43**  
**Friday, April 10, 2020**  
**Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Coos Bay, Oregon**

Several of the small groups here at Gloria Dei have ready, plan to read or are in the process of reading Philip Yancey's powerful book, *What's So Amazing About Grace*. If you're not in a group that has done so, I suggest that after the service, you go online and order it. It's that good.

A couple of years ago, my congregation in Vermont studied this book. We met weekly and the study was scheduled for six sessions, but we actually took six months to finish the book and study guide...there was so much discussion, so much passion for its words and stories, that we needed the extra time to thoroughly discuss every bit of the book. I secretly think that they just didn't want the group to end. Some said the book changed their lives, others, that it was the most helpful book they'd ever read.

That's because the book is all about forgiveness. Pure and genuine forgiveness. Forgiving others for the hurts they have caused us. Forgiving those who haven't asked for forgiveness. Forgiving ourselves.

Yancey includes in his book dozens of examples of people who have endured heinous hurts at the hand of others – things no one would expect anyone to forgive. Yancey includes the following story that his friend, Pastor Tony Campolo, tells.

Following WWII, life was tough for the Russian people. And since nearly 40 million Russians had died in the war, nearly every family in the Moscow area had been affected.

When the war was over, the Nazi prisoners of war were taken from their stockade and marched down the main street of Moscow to the train station to be shipped back to Germany. The people of Moscow wanted to get at these prisoners who had brought such devastation and death into their lives. They wanted to tear these Nazis to pieces. The Russian soldiers could barely hold back the angry crowd along the route to the train.

The first group of Nazis who came down the street was the officers – their heads high, their uniforms carefully buttoned, as they marched with typical Nazi arrogance. They were out to demonstrate to the angry mob that they had not been daunted by their imprisonment and were still men of dignity. As the Nazi officers marched toward the train station, the people screamed and yelled obscenities at them, trying to break through the barriers to attack the prisoners.

Had one of the Russian soldiers looked the other way and let the angry crowd confront the defeated German soldiers, no one would have doubted that they would have gotten what they deserved.

But I wonder, what would the world look like if people actually got what they deserved?

How many of us have gleefully used the expression, 'what goes around comes around'? Think about it.

What if slum lords suddenly found themselves locked in dank, rat-infested quarters? That would be okay, wouldn't it?

What if the investment banking crooks who have swindled hard working folks out of their life's savings could be forced to face real life choices such as deciding between buying medicine for themselves or buying food for their children? That would be okay? Of course.

What if arsonists could see their own homes burn down? That would be okay, right?

But then I thought, what if I got what *I* deserved?

Oh, I didn't want to think about that at all! But since it's Lent, and I did.

I thought about how often I fail the people I love...

About how I often don't measure up to other people's expectations of me...

I thought about all the times I don't speak up, don't lend a hand, don't give what I should.

But I am not only failing other people, I am failing God.

Oh, I fail God in so many ways.

What if I got what I deserved?

What if I had no one to speak up for me on my behalf?

What if when I needed help, no one was there for me?

What if I didn't have the ability to stick up for myself?

What if God said to me, "you'll get what you deserve?"

In the gospel text, the criminal hanging beside Jesus admitted he was a guilty man and says he got what he deserved, but he asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom.

We, too, are in need of asking Jesus to remember us when we fail God.

But the good news that comes out of this day, the miracle of the gospel is that ...we don't get what we deserve.

Instead of condemning the criminal on the cross, Jesus ensure that he didn't get what he deserved. In fact, Jesus grants the man more than he asked for.

God's abundant grace, the free, undeserved gift of love was offered to the criminal and that same unconditional love is extended to us all.

Jesus' words to the criminal on the cross are offered to us as well.

Instead of telling me I will get what I deserve, what Jesus says to me is, "when you die, you will join me in the kingdom of heaven."

The people in Philip Yancey's stories share a common theme, the victim has acquired the ability to forgive his or her perpetrator and that is what has made them strong. Like the

criminal on the cross, the people in Yancey's stories are able to come out on the other side of the episode transformed.

The Russian crowd on that summer's day in 1945 in Moscow suddenly went silent as they saw the second group of German soldiers marching behind the officers toward the train station. These were the German enlisted men. Not having been as well treated as their superiors, they were on the verge of death by starvation. Their bodies were skin and bones.

What had once been their uniforms were now rags. They were doing their best to make their way toward the train station, the stronger ones holding up the weaker. They were an incredibly wretched sight to behold. Pitiful. The crowd grew silent and then, somehow, a woman broke through the line of Russian soldiers, went up to one of the prisoners, and give him a piece of bread. Other women ran to their homes and got what little food they could, returning to give what they had to feed the starving enemy soldiers.

Suddenly, those German soldiers were transformed in the eyes of the Russian onlookers that afternoon. No longer were they seen as arrogant, evil men. Instead, each of them had become, in the eyes of most of the onlookers, somebody else's little boy, hungry, perhaps dying, and very far away from home. ... Forgiven. And by showing forgiveness, the Russians' lives were also forever changed.

To be Christian is to view others with a Christ-like understanding and empathy.

I pray that we realize that by God's grace, we all receive far more grace, love and forgiveness than we deserve.

Amen.