

# First Sunday of Lent – “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

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Orators declaim. Politicians make speeches. Preachers give sermons. Pundits pontificate. With so many words and so much noise, it's no wonder people turn a deaf ear. But, when someone is on their deathbed, people listen for a last word, a word, a kernel of wisdom that will sum up a whole lifetime of learning and loving, a lifetime of failures and accomplishments ... a last will and testament from the one leaving to the ones who remain.

Jesus, as He hung upon the cross on Calvary's hill, preached the most eloquent and memorable sermon ever delivered ... and He spoke only seven words ... Seven Last Words. This lent, the Church calls us to the foot of the Lord's cross so that we might hear what Our Lord says and grow from the hearing.

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

Back in November, my Mom, who had been living on her own in the three-bedroom apartment in New York she and my Dad had shared since 1958, had what the doctors called a fairly mild stroke. It may have been mild, but it robbed my Mom of all of her short-term memory. She couldn't live on her own anymore and so, she went to live in a beautiful facility in northern New Jersey. So, for the last many weeks, it's fallen to me to go to the apartment in New York to pack up memories, to throw out stuff that's accumulated over all those years, and to ready the place for movers who will come to disperse the

treasures of a lifetime. It's been kind of a sad job, at once a walk down memory lane, but also like a death before there's been one. I find myself remembering things, thinking about things I haven't thought about for years.

I remember when I first went away to college in Worcester, I was so homesick for the first few months. But I met other kids and made friendships that have lasted to this day. It was the spring of my freshman year and I wanted to bring two of my friends home to meet my family ... the family I loved, the family I was so proud of. I especially wanted them to meet my Dad who I thought they'd think was a great guy and most especially my Mom, who I still think is a great lady. I didn't tell my Mom we were coming. I said to myself it was because I didn't want her to fuss, but I think it might have really been because I was afraid she might have said no. Anyway, after the three hour drive, we appeared at the door. I was all bubbly and excited as I introduced my friends all around. My Mom was somewhat less enthusiastic. As a matter of fact, she was cold as ice, downright rude! I was shocked, embarrassed, hurt, angry. Here was the person I loved most in the world acting like a shrew. We went into my bedroom, she and I. I slammed the door so my friends didn't hafta hear it all and we had the worst, most awful fight I've ever had with anyone in my life. I threw the kitchen sink at her and she gave as good as she got. There were shouts, tears, terrible words and then I remember when she saw my tears, it was as if a switch went off. She got real calm, looked as if she thought what have I done to my kid. She sat on the bed. She talked softly, gently until I calmed down. She gave me a long, deep hug and then she went out to the kitchen to start dinner ... and she couldn't have been nicer or more welcoming to my friends.

What I didn't know till much later was that her oldest brother was dying and she was tense with worry. What she didn't know was how proud I was of my family, especially of her, and how I wanted to show them off.

Jesus' first word, in the midst of the horror of the cross: the pain, the unfairness of it all, the spitting, the jeering, the loneliness, was "Abba", "Papa". He turned to the One He loved most of all. And then, though He had every right to be angry, to be despondent, to cry vengeance, He asked forgiveness for the soldiers who whipped Him and nailed Him, for the disciples who deserted Him, for the crowds who abused Him, for the leaders who feared Him, for the politicians who scapegoated Him ... and for me, for every time I would slap Him with my meanness, deny Him with my self-centeredness, betray Him with my backsliding. He excused them, He excused me ... they don't know ... they don't know what they're doing.

I don't deserve to have the same Father He has ... but, I do. I don't deserve to be excused because I didn't know any better ... but, I am. I don't deserve His forgiveness, but I have it.

I deserve to be disowned. I deserve to be held responsible cuz I should have known better. I deserve to be punished. But, from the cross with His arms splayed out on a wooden beam, God hugged me. God hugged me.