
Good Friday: Computers, Poison, and Forgiveness

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Good Friday

Andre Crouch used to sing a song called, "Somebody Told Me." "I didn't think it could be," he sang, "until it happened to me." Well, those words are true about a lot of things. I didn't think it could be, until it happened to me.

Like you, I had heard plenty of tales by now of computer disaster. Friends had told me that their entire hard drives had been erased. Folks told me stories about losing all their letters and essays, documents and even -God forbid- sermons!

So, last winter, I made certain it would not happen to me. The Cathedral purchased the services of a terrific information technology firm. It still is a great firm. But my laptop computer was special. I had stored all sorts of history and notes and research on it, in files scattered all over the hard drive.

I talked patiently with my new techno-buddy about how all of the data would be transferred to my laptop computer. He made the transfer amazingly well - amazingly well! - except for one area.

Ever since the Episcopal General Convention of 2003, I have been reading e-mails and messages and newsletters and sermons of reaction. Every one I thought especially interesting or especially provocative, either negatively or positively, I was saving. I was making a catalog of contention. I was amazed by some of the sharp wisdom, and I was amazed by some of the dull stupidity. By December of 2004, I had accumulated a lot, in a neat "General Convention reaction" file.

Guess which was the only file lost? Yes, when my information technology genius made the data transfer, the "General Convention reaction" file was the one that didn't make it.

It was lost, wiped clean, forgotten, words and letters reduced again to mere binary 0's and 1's, primitive sounds and syllables with no meaning whatsoever.

And you know what? That loss was a forgiveness, a release, a letting go. Much of that material was acerbic indeed.

In fact, as I considered what I had been keeping, I felt like I was collecting poison. Some of the material was exceptionally vitriolic and bitter. Some of it was directed starkly at me. I was collecting it, expecting to review it one day, to reflect on that strange fruit one day when the air was clearer. I was collecting viruses just like they do at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta. I was collecting things in my computer Petri dish that people should not have been saying. I wanted us, all of us, the church, world, and the devil -and God, too! I wanted all of us to hear it again one day.

Obviously, my information technology genius had no idea what went wrong, but he turned out to be a saint. He did it right.

He ended up saving what was important. He ended up losing what was not important. He knew how to retain words of blessings, and how to utterly erase our curses, our cuts and jabs, made all too quickly in the heat of frustration.

That is forgiveness. I didn't think it could be until it happened to me.

I didn't think I could be forgiven. I thought I knew about forgiveness. I had certainly done my share of study and research, and even preaching. Forgiveness means wiping clean, even when I did not ask for it.

Today is a day of forgiveness in this sacred place, the Cathedral of St. Philip. We are old and established and traditional indeed.

And what is it that we are old and established in? We are old and established in forgiveness. Today, Good Friday, we gather at the Cathedral to see forgiveness, face to face. Today, Good Friday, is the day we hear Jesus look down from agony and from sure defeat. He looks down, at us, from utter loss, and he says, "Forgive. Forgive them, for they know not what they do."

They know not what they do. Just who does Jesus mean when he says "them?" Who needed forgiveness? Mel Gibson has an answer. Michael Moore has an answer. I have an answer. My colleagues have an answer. Our bishops have an answer.

All of us have been asking, "Who should repent?"

And our answer comes all too easily to us. Who needs to repent? It's You! It's always "You." You, you, you. You are the one who done me wrong. Oh, it hurts so much it's like a poison set forth in me. Repent, stop! Turn around. That is our cry towards one another.

But from Calvary, from the cross, another cry comes. Jesus does not look down from the cross and shout out "Repent!" Those are not the words from his mouth, are they?

Jesus says something else. From the Cross, Jesus says "Father, forgive." They are the same words scribbled on a burned-out altar at Coventry Cathedral. They are the last words of dear St. Stephen, who died before we even knew what a martyr was. They are the last words of most of our Christian saints. Forgive them, for they know not what they do.

What in the world has the Episcopal Church been doing in the last two years? If we listened only to the media headlines, we would think that the Episcopal Church is really just the repository of my old computer hard drive. All we have been doing is assembling data against one another. We've been storing up poison for each other. Our naysayers believe that we have become a repository of resentment and accusation.

"I accuse you," the world wants us to say. The newspapers would love to have reported that Jesus lashed out in accusation from the cross. The headlines would read, "Innocent Man Hauled up on False Charges Finally Gets his Accusations Out!"

But no, not today. No, from Calvary, the words are different. Forgive. Forgive them.

The strength of the Christian Church has never been in how we accuse. The strength of the church is in how we forgive.

Forgiveness does not wait for repentance. True forgiveness does not wait for repentance.

Ultimately, the Church is centered in forgiveness. No other institution we participate in can give us forgiveness. Sure, there are plenty of good and generous institutions in the world. But few of those institutions are really about forgiveness. And certainly the media, certainly the newspapers and television shows cannot give us forgiveness.

What happens when we forgive?

Well, when we forgive, we come back to life! When we forgive, we are somehow born again! Death is overturned! Forgiveness is the antidote to the poison all around us; forgiveness is the health which defeats viruses.

So, is the Church close to death? Are we on the brink of falling apart? No, the Church will never fall as long as one activity survives. Our services may look different from time to time. Our ministers may look different from time to time. Our prayer books may look different from generation to generation. But the Church will never fail as long as one activity survives; forgiveness.

As long as the Church is in the business of forgiveness, the Church is in business.

God has something else for us today.

Yes, we are set free by the forgiveness of God; but the great secret of forgiveness is that being forgiven doesn't set us free completely. It's great, to be sure.

But do you know what really sets us free? It's not the acceptance of being forgiven. It's doing the forgiving ourselves. What sets us free is the moment we forgive!

The moment we forgive. That's when Jesus displayed his most divine action. That's when Jesus truly was freed from bondage. It was when he looked down from Calvary and said, "Father forgive them." That was when Jesus was truly raised from the dead: at the moment of forgiveness. Good Friday shows the divinity of Jesus just as much as Easter does.

Is the Church in crisis? At a turning point? A crossroads? You bet it is. The Church should always be at the Cross. And whenever we are at the Cross, we are in crisis, at a turning point.

That point is exactly where we are supposed to be. The point of the Cross is forgiveness.

We are free today from poisons and viruses and anxieties and obsessions. Those files in our data bases are wiped clean. Our souls are a clean slate, ready for love, ready to forgive others just as we have been forgiven, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN.

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