

Forgiven and Forgiving

12th Weekend in Kingdomtide – August 6/7, 2005

Sermon Background Study

Psalm 103:1-5 (NRSV)

¹Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name.
²Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits—
³who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
⁴who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
⁵who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

2 Corinthians 2:5-11 (NRSV)

⁵But if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but to some extent—not to exaggerate it—to all of you. ⁶This punishment by the majority is enough for such a person; ⁷so now instead you should forgive and console him, so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸So I urge you to reaffirm your love for him. ⁹I wrote for this reason: to test you and to know whether you are obedient in everything. ¹⁰Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ. ¹¹And we do this so that we may not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.

Today, we turn to questions about forgiveness. Have we truly, really, been forgiven? Is God's forgiveness available to anyone? How can we learn to forgive as we have been forgiven?

This has been one of the most challenging series for me to write and for Robert to preach. The questions from the cards get right to the heart of what matters most to us. The questions are challenging and often unanswerable. Being both theologically honest and pastorally sensitive is difficult. The “playing field” each week is vast. What can really be said in 1800 words or twenty minutes? Nonetheless, we press on, striving to be genuine, thoughtful, and informed in our proclamation of the Good News – and it is pretty hard to miss the Good News today.

Forgiven

It is one thing to say the words, “I am forgiven.” It is another thing entirely to take it to heart. We have enough trouble forgiving ourselves or those we love the most. The idea that we will one day stand before God as a forgiven people, as a forgiven person – well, it is almost too much to comprehend. The great hymn, “Amazing Grace,” is aptly named. It is amazing, even shocking. In class after class that I teach, people ask me whether forgiveness is available to the most horrid monster they can imagine, such as Hitler or John Gacy. No matter how many times we answer the question, “yes,” as we should, it still shocks us, even scandalizes us. Could this really be?

First, ask yourself what needs forgiving. You'll find that it is all the ways in which we have failed to love God and to love one another. “Sins” is the word we often use to describe all those ways. Here is a useful definition of sin: *sin is whatever separates us from God.* Think of sin as a large chasm. God stands on one side of the chasm and we stand on the other side. It wasn't always this way. God once came in the evenings to walk with Adam and Eve, but that ended with their sin. They were separated from God; we are separated from God. Thus, the obvious question is how do we cross the chasm to God? The short answer is that we can't cross the chasm by our own efforts. Rather, the chasm has been closed by God,

“How do you know when or if you have been forgiven for something you have done wrong?”

There were certain questions from the cards that really tugged at my heart. This was one of them. I wanted to say to the person . . . “be assured of this, we are a forgiven people, you are a forgiven person, I am forgiven. God's grace pours over us like water over a waterfall. Is there a catch? No.”

What should characterize God's forgiven people? Repentant hearts for one. We know how far short we fall of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). We know that we do not love God and love others as we should. Yet, each day, we awake determined to do better, to leave a bit more of our sinful selves behind us.

What should *not* characterize God's forgiven people? Ungrateful hearts for one. Paul preached God's message of grace and forgiveness of sins. Too often, people reacted by saying to themselves something like this: “If we've been forgiven, then let's go sin some more and get forgiven again. In fact, grace is so wonderful, let's sin a lot so there can be more grace” (Romans 6:1). Of course, this was all nonsense. The only appropriate response to God's grace is grateful obedience, striving for a life ever more freed from the pain of sin.

through his faithfulness to his covenant, through Jesus' faithfulness all the way to the cross. It is by God's grace¹ and grace alone that we have been forgiven. In some mysterious way, never fully articulated in the New Testament, we have been reconciled to God through the death of Jesus on the cross. We have been redeemed. We have been made right with God. We have been justified. We have been forgiven. We have been saved. The chasm has been closed.

The next obvious question is this ~ for whom has the chasm been closed? Who has been made right with God? It is the people of God who are a forgiven people, who have been redeemed. And how would we know who those people are? The people of God are those who have faith in Jesus Christ. As the apostle Paul put it, the "badge of membership" in the people of God was once circumcision, keeping the Sabbath, the avoidance of pork and so on. But now, with Jesus' death and resurrection the "badge of membership" in the people of God is simply faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 3:21-31).

The next question is often: But what about all those people who don't come to faith in Christ or have never even heard of him? Frankly, I'm glad that all this is ultimately in God's job description, not mine! As we have said so often in this series, we come back to our own response - will we trust God? Are we really willing to rely on God's goodness, love, wisdom, mercy, and justice? I am. Do I hold out the hope that God's grace extends past the grave, that people might have the opportunity to come to faith in Christ after death? I do, for I can find nothing in Scripture that prevents me from genuinely holding to such hope. . . . but in the end, I trust God.

Forgiving

The apostle Paul was in the business of founding communities of new Christians. We can easily imagine (or can we?) the problems and difficulties that must have arisen. Today's passage from one of Paul's letters to the Christians in Corinth is about a man who must have done something terrible and was, in essence, kicked out of the community. Paul was known to urge this from time to time when someone posed so big a threat that the community's existence was in doubt. We don't know much about the

"Christ told us to love one another as he loves us, even to love our enemies. I have difficulty sincerely loving enemies/transgressors. Even with Christ as the ideal and goal, how do you [God] view our repeated failures to live up to the ideal?"

Who among us is truly capable of loving our enemies as we love ourselves (Matthew 5:44)? Though we strive to love as Jesus taught us to love, we know that we fall far short of the goal.

God responds not only by forgiving us in our weakness and selfishness, but by providing us with a helper, the Holy Spirit, who works with us every day and in every way so that we might become ever more loving and ever truer disciples of Jesus.

We forget sometimes that we are not alone in our struggles to become more Christ-like. If we were alone, we would be lost; it would be hopeless. Rather, by the Spirit of Christ (a term Paul uses to name the Holy Spirit) we are strengthened and encouraged to learn alongside our fellow believers what it really means to love.

circumstances, only what we can infer from the letter. But what is clear is that Paul is telling the community that the time has come to bring the man back in, to forgive and to console him.

This has nothing to do with whether the man deserves the forgiveness. There is nothing said about his repentance or about a change in ways. Paul simply says it is time to forgive.

Forgiveness in the New Testament "is a term whose understanding is grounded in God's giving freely and graciously to people who do not deserve it. . . . [In a community] the term functions to describe the restoration of relationships between or among people."² Grace and forgiveness are bound together. Indeed, sometimes in the NT, the word translated as "forgive" (including in today's passage from 2 Corinthians) is actually a derivation from the Greek, *charis*, meaning "grace" or "gift."

Yet how hard it can be for us to offer this grace, this forgiveness, to others, even to those we love. Instead, we harbor our hurts and slights. How many spouses have not said to themselves at one time or another, I'm not going to apologize until she apologizes first. Or perhaps, I can't forgive until she repents.

But instead of all this counting and figuring, all this balancing of hurts and slights, Jesus instructs us to simply forgive as we have been forgiven, to extend to others the grace that has been extended to us. How can we possibly do this? Only by the power of the Holy Spirit, yet another of God's many gifts to us. Truly, forgiveness unlocks the power of love.

¹I still like the "old-fashioned" definition of grace. God's grace is God's unmerited favor. If we merited (deserved) forgiveness, it wouldn't be grace. If we earned it, it isn't grace. Grace can neither be deserved nor merited or, by definition, it isn't grace.

²from Paul Sampley's commentary on 2 Corinthians in the *New Interpreters Bible*, available in the St. Andrew library.

Daily Bible Readings

(more on forgiveness)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Matthew 6:14-15 & Matthew 18:21-22 Jesus teaches about our duty to forgive without limit.</p>	<p>Day 2 Genesis 45:5-14 & 50:15-21 Joseph (of the many-colored coat) forgives his enemies.</p>
<p>Day 3 1 Samuel 24: 8-12 & 26:21-25 David forgives Saul for trying to kill him.</p>	<p>Day 4 Mark 2: 1-12 Jesus forgives the sins of a paralytic. This would have been shocking to those watching - who can forgive sins but God?!</p>
<p>Day 5 Nehemiah 9 The people of God gather to confess their sins to a forgiving God (v. 17 contains a well-known description of God's forgiveness and love).</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Mark your calendars!! *A Passionate Life*

A new six week sermon and teaching series beginning NEXT WEEK!!

Do you have passion in your life? Are you passionate about your faith? Are you a passionate disciple of Jesus? We know that passion is key to a fulfilled, happy, and productive life. But passion seems to elude so many of us. Did you ever see another Christian and say to yourself, "I want some of that!" In this new series, we will explore how to regain the passion in our lives and learn some simple easy-to-remember tools to help us in this. You will want to be a part of this!!

August Book Recommendation

***A Passionate Life*, by Mike Breen and Walt Kallestad**

This is the book that underlies the upcoming sermon and teaching series. It is an easy read, but still filled with many helpful, easy-to-remember, and challenging teachings. We hope that you will pick up a copy in the bookstore and read it before or during the sermon series.

Fall Bible Academy course schedule and registration is now on-line at www.standrewccl.org. We've got a great line-up. Check it out!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

You might begin today by sharing some of your own stories about the power of forgiveness. What do these stories share in common? Have you ever been surprised by the outcome created by forgiveness? How so? Why do we find it so difficult to forgive? Why are we so often insistent that forgiveness must be preceded by an apology? Do you think that forgiveness can create a repentant heart? How might this be?

Let's turn to God's forgiveness of ourselves. Few topics in my classes lead to more tears than this one. It seems that many of us have a very difficult time truly accepting and believing that we have been forgiven, that nothing we've done in the past lies outside the power of God's grace. Why do you think that this is so difficult to accept? How can we make God's forgiveness seem more concrete and certain? If we accept that the ground of our forgiveness is the cross, how can we help others to see that there could be no better demonstration of the depth of God's love. The limitations lie in our own abilities to receive, not in God's ability to give.

Finally, how do we avoid the trap of believing that "anything goes" since we are going to be forgiven anyway? Do you think a heart that truly trusts and loves Jesus could ever adopt such an attitude? How would you help a new believer to understand that the appropriate response to God's grace is obedience, and not the obedience of a willing, but reluctant, law-keeper, but the obedience of a loving heart.