

FORGIVENESS? OR LOVE?

(02/26/12)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 15:11-32

“So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.”
(Luke 15:20)

As you know, Ash Wednesday was this past Wednesday. Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, the forty days (not including Sundays) that precede Easter. The theme of Ash Wednesday is repentance, and the purple color that is associated with repentance carries through the entire Lenten season.

This year, for the theme of our Lenten reflections, I would like to focus not on our sin and our need for repentance, but on forgiveness. It seems to me that this matter of forgiveness is a major dimension in our relationships: in our relationship with God; in nations' relationship with other nations; in our relationships with each other, especially within our families; and in our relationship with ourselves.

I was thinking of the matter of forgiveness this past week as I listened to a program on National Public Radio. The theme of the discussion was how much the past history of conflict among European countries still shapes their feelings toward each other and interferes with their ability to work together for the common good. It was clear from interviews with citizens of a small Greek village that they had neither forgiven nor forgotten the atrocities that were inflicted on them by the Germans during World War II, and how this hindered their will to work together with Germany and the other Eurozone countries to make the kinds of economic changes that need to be made to prevent Greece from defaulting on its debts and precipitating an economic crisis that would affect not only Europe but the rest of the world as well.

The topic then shifted to the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Each side has its own understanding of the root causes of a conflict that has been going on for over half a century; both sides keep a well-documented tally of the atrocities that have been committed by the other side; and since neither side is willing or able to either forgive or forget, their quest for a just and lasting peace is doomed to failure.

This morning, as we begin our thinking about forgiveness, I want to start with the theme of forgiveness in our relationship with God. Let me begin by saying that I believe the traditional Christian emphasis on forgiveness, not the forgiveness that we should extend to each other but God's forgiveness of us, is a misguided emphasis. It is off center to the message of the Christian gospel. It is not that I want to eliminate the confession of our personal and institutional sin and our need to seek forgiveness. I just want us to think about whether the dynamic of sin and forgiveness, sin and salvation, is the central theme of Jesus' life and teaching.

In the Old Testament, the record of God's relationship with Israel, a central theme is that of covenant. Some biblical scholars believe this is the central theme of the Old Testament. God establishes a covenant between himself and Abraham. This covenant extends to the sons and daughters of Abraham and Sarah. The covenant is basically this: "I will be your God if you will be my people."

There were times when the Israelites were faithful to this covenant. When they were, God walked with them, blessed them, and gave them power over their enemies. When they observed the covenant, following the many religious and dietary laws commanded by God, they prospered. Although the covenant was originally established between God and a people, the people of Israel, it eventually evolved into a covenant between God and individuals as well.

There were other times, many other times, when the Israelites were not faithful to the covenant. They broke the covenant. They may have done this by turning to other gods, e.g., when they constructed and then worshipped a golden calf while Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. They may have done this by simply forgetting about Yahweh, forgetting about all he had done for them, how he led them out of slavery in Egypt and gave them the Promised Land. They may have done this by not showing compassion to the widow and the orphan, the sojourner at their gates, by violating not only the Ten Commandments but also the code of hospitality.

The Old Testament is a history or description of a people's covenantal relationship with God. There were times when the Israelites turned away from God. There were also times, usually in response to the unfaithfulness of his people, when God turned away from them, when God "hid his face" or "turned his back" on the people of Israel. If you want some good examples of this, read the Psalms. The psalmist at times expresses his anger that God has either deserted or punished his people. At other times the psalmist is repentant, and at still other times hopeful -- hopeful that the broken covenant could be restored.

When you look at the way our Bible is organized, you can see that this central theme of covenant carries over into the New Testament. Our Bible is comprised of the Old Testament and the New Testament, more accurately translated as the Old Covenant and the New Covenant.

As Christians we believe that Jesus came to articulate or reveal a new covenant between God and us. The central message of the new covenant is that we do not have to earn our way back into God's good graces. In fact, there is nothing we can do to heal the brokenness that has come about through our sin. The message of the Gospel is that God has already restored the broken covenant, has already forgiven our sins. Jesus, through his death on the cross, paid the price that we could not pay. All we have to do is accept this, believe this, and we are saved.

I confess that I have a little difficulty with this doctrine of covenant. It seems too narrow to describe our relationship with God. First, as it is described in the Old Testament, God's covenant did not extend past the people of Israel, the sons and

daughters of Abraham. The God of such a covenant would be a small, a tribal God. This God would not be the God of all people, the God of all creation. When I think about the depiction of God in the Old Testament, I have the feeling that this God is too small to be the real, the living God.

Second, a covenant is an agreement, a pledge, or a contract. An agreement or a contract can be broken or violated by either party to the agreement. This would make the contract null and void. When the covenant was broken, as it was so many times in the history of Israel, it needed to be restored. According to the Old Testament, the covenant could be restored only through the Israelites' repentance and return to God. If they once again become God's people, he would once again be their God. The people of Israel could accomplish this restoration of the covenant by returning to the revealed religious observances and by living a moral life, a life that is pleasing to God.

The theme of sin and forgiveness is central to the Old Testament. It is central to this people's understanding of their relationship with God. If they turn away from God, God will turn away from them. If they return to God, their sins will be forgiven. As recorded in the book of the prophet Isaiah (chapter 1 verses 15-20), God says to Israel:

*When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers, I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.
Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes;
cease to do evil, learn to do good;
seek justice, rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan, plead for the widow.
Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord:
though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow;
though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.
If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land;
but if you refuse and rebel,
you shall be devoured by the sword;
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.*

This theme of forgiveness, the washing away or forgiving of our sins carries over into the New Testament. It is articulated in the Lord's Prayer, where we ask God to forgive our debts or trespasses to the same degree that we forgive those who are indebted to us or who trespass against us. However, even here I believe Jesus was saying more about our need to forgive each other than about God's forgiveness of us.

As I explored the theme of forgiveness this past week, I found there were actually few references to forgiveness in the synoptic gospels, basically only two in Mark and three or four in Matthew and Luke. There is only one in John and only a few in Paul's letters to the early churches, all of which are directed toward the role of forgiveness in human relationships, its importance within the Christian community.

I believe that sin and forgiveness are not the central theme of the New Testament and the gospel that Jesus came to proclaim because the new teaching, the new revelation about God is that our relationship with God is not a covenant. It is not a covenantal pact, a contract that can be broken or severed by either party. It is a relationship. It is the kind of relationship that exists between a parent and a child.

If Jesus was correct in his assertion that God is like a loving parent, then why would God place such importance on sin? If a good and loving human parent would not do this in relation to his/her child, why would God do this in God's relationship with us? If God is like a good and loving parent, then there could be no list of all the sins we have committed in thought, word, and deed. In any relationship, whether it is the relationship between a parent and a child, a child and a parent, or a spouse and a spouse, a list, a record of all the things the other person has done wrong would be a sure-fire way to kill the relationship. Jesus tells us that our relationship with God is not about sin and forgiveness; it is about acceptance and love.

The parable of the Prodigal Son is one of Jesus' central teachings. I do not think it is about forgiveness, about the father's forgiveness of the son. The son admittedly behaves in a reckless and immature manner. His decision to squander his inheritance and live his life in the fast lane is ill advised. Eventually he comes to his senses. He realizes it was stupid to walk away from his father, his mother, and his family, to turn his back on that relationship which should have been in the center of his life.

The son initially conceptualizes or casts the problem as one of sin. He says to himself, I will return home and tell my father, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired servants." The son wants to confess his sin and be forgiven. He wants the broken covenant with his father to be restored. But this is not what happens.

The father "sees his son coming from afar." Why was he able to see him coming from afar? The father was able to see his son while the son was still a long way down the road because the father was standing on the front porch waiting. No matter how many years had passed, the father waited for his son. During this time, according to the Old Testament way of thinking, the covenant between the father and the son was broken. According to the New Testament, however, the bond between the father and the son was not a covenant, a contract. It was a relationship, a relationship of love. This relationship can never be broken, no matter what the son might do.

The son never gets to confess his "sin." The father, who is "filled with compassion," isn't interested. He doesn't want to make his son crawl. He simply runs to his son, puts his arms around him, kisses him, and welcomes him back with joy. When the son begins his rehearsed speech, the speech about having sinned against heaven and against his father, the father doesn't want to hear it. The father never actually forgives his son. He is too busy preparing for the celebration.

Several years ago I attended a conference on reactive attachment disorder in children and adolescents. The presenter made an interesting point, a point that I

believe is a *propos* to the Parable of the Prodigal Son and Jesus' teaching about our relationship with God. The presenter said that whereas a parent bonds with a child; a child attaches to a parent. A bond cannot be broken, while an attachment can, for a parent-child bond is unconditional. There is nothing the child can do to break it.

Jesus tells us that God's relationship with us cannot be broken. God's love for us is never withdrawn, no matter how stupid, immoral or self-centered we may become. Even if we forget about God, even if we deny God's existence or reality in our lives, we cannot break this relationship. God is like the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son: patiently waiting for us to return.

I think it is unfortunate that we have historically viewed our relationship with God in the terms of a covenant. This leads us to cast the relationship in terms of broken and restored, broken through sin and restored through forgiveness. This is not the way a parent would view his/her relationship with his/her child. The parent-child relationship is not a covenant that can be broken by anything the child might say or do. The relationship is about love, a love that accepts the child even with his/her shadow side. It is about love -- period.

Note that the father in the parable does not celebrate the son's confession; he celebrates the son's return. "My son was dead; now he is alive. He was blind; now he sees." I think the metaphors of being dead and then coming alive, of being blind and having our sight restored, of being asleep and being awakened are more descriptive of our relationship with God that being in a state of sin and being forgiven.

Our opening hymn this morning, "The King of Love My Shepherd Is," a re-articulation of the twenty-third psalm, says nothing about sin and forgiveness. If, as Jesus tells us, God is like a good shepherd, then God wants to guide us to the green pastures, to the still waters; he wants to restore our soul and lead us in the paths of righteousness. The second hymn, "God, Be Merciful to Me," which I included for contrast, is centered on the themes of sin and forgiveness, about the need to be washed in the blood of the Lamb. Read them both and see which seems to be a more accurate presentation of Jesus' teaching, especially in light of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Then read the words of the third hymn, "Amazing Grace." It is about being lost and being found, of being blind and having one's sight restored by the grace and the healing power of God.

The son, who is dwelling in a far off land, hears a sound, a voice that calls him back to his senses. When he returns home, he experiences once again the "love that wilt not let him go." He then lives his life out of this love. He lives his life with not only the belief but also the knowledge that his father's love is so big it can embrace him even when he screws up, when he is dwelling in a far-off land. To be sure, he was lost. He, like us, had lost sight of, lost touch with a fundamental reality of his existence and all existence: the unconditional love and constant presence of God. It is our awareness of this love that can lead us through all the dangers, toils and snares of our lives, and it is this love that, like a homing device, can lead us "home."

Read the words of the three hymns that are included in our worship service this morning. Then listen to your feelings. Think about which of them more clearly articulates your understanding of our relationship with God. Think about which of them best portrays the picture of God that Jesus gives us in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Then rejoice, just as the son rejoiced, knowing that nothing in all creation can ever separate us from the Love of God that is present to us in Christ Jesus our Lord. Not even our own sin.

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