

FORGIVENESS CAN SET YOU FREE!

(02/25/18)

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 139: 1-6, 23-24
Luke 7:36-50; 23:34

“Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little.” (Luke 7:47)

Today is the second Sunday in the liturgical season of Lent. This morning we are picking up on the theme that was to be the focus of our cancelled United Parishes of Southborough Lenten series: the theme of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is an integral part of the events of Holy Week, Easter, and the post-resurrection encounters with the risen Christ. It is freely offered to the thief on the cross. Jesus forgives Peter for his denial, the disciples for their desertion, and even Judas for his betrayal. I think the prayer of forgiveness that Jesus offered for his executioners applies to Judas as well: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Love is also an integral part of the Easter message: Jesus’ love in laying down his life for us, his friends; the Maundy Thursday commandment that we love one another even as Jesus has loved us; and the power of God’s great love, a love that sent us Jesus, a love that we now know reaches past the grave. Love and forgiveness also show themselves to be inextricably interwoven in Jesus’ encounter with the sinful woman.

Hobart Mowrer, an American psychiatrist in the 1960's and author of *The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion*, had a somewhat unorthodox approach to psychotherapy.

The person would come into Dr. Mowrer's office and sit down. Before he/she could begin to describe the reason he/she was seeking psychotherapy, Mowrer would ask the following question: "What are the five worst things you have ever done in your life, the things of which you are most ashamed?" After the initial shock, some people began to struggle with this difficult question. Others, not surprisingly, walked out of the room, figuring that this doctor was ever nuttier than they were!

Mowrer had a rationale for this line of questioning. He realized that most of us believe we have committed several significant, serious, perhaps even unforgivable sins, and that most of us have repressed these sins, hidden them in the unconscious. We repress these sins because we believe they make us unacceptable and unlovable. We

keep them hidden from human view, thereby "fooling" people into thinking we are something or someone we know deep down we are not.

And so, Mowrer says, we keep these sins hidden, kept out of consciousness as much as is humanly possible. When they rise to consciousness or come out into the open, we begin to feel anxious; we begin to experience unpleasant feelings or painful memories, so we try to push them back down. Mowrer believes that the precious psychic energy we expend on this repression could be better utilized in the service of living.

Sometimes, according to Mowrer, the sins are memories of specific acts such as an illicit sexual relationship or the abuse of a child. Sometimes the sins are vague feelings, such as the feeling of having let our parents down, of having let our children down. We realize we have said or done many things that have hurt those we love.

We keep these secret sins hidden from view. No one knows the deep dark memories we carry within us, and consequently, what sort of person we really are. Ah, but there's a catch! Someone does know! The 139th Psalm reminds us that the God who knows the depths of each person's soul, who knows the secrets of every heart--that God knows. No matter how clever we are, we cannot hide our sins from God.

Some people try by pushing these painful memories down real deep. Others believe that if they step out of the game, e.g., if they pull out of all religious belief systems, they are no longer accountable to God. What they are saying, in effect, is "I don't feel guilty because I don't believe there is a God who knows my sins and holds me accountable." As Ivan, in Dostoevsky's *The Brother Karamazov*, says, "If God does not exist, then everything is permitted." If there is no God, the word "sin" is meaningless.

There is a problem with this clever attempt to evade taking responsibility for our life. We didn't make up the rules for life. We didn't create the game, and we have no say as to whether we're in the game or not. God created the game, made up the rules, and decides whether we are held accountable or not. The psalmist tells us that if God encompasses all, we can't even escape from the consequences of our sins through death. Sadly, however, some people choose suicide as a desperate attempt at escape.

In plain, simple terms, many of us go through life feeling guilty. It's not that we walk around saying to ourselves, "I'm guilty," "I'm sinful," "I'm a bad person" though, come to think of it, some people do. It's similar to feelings of low self-esteem. We don't

normally walk around saying to ourselves "I'm worthless," "I'm no good," "Nothing I do ever works out" though, come to think of it, some people do. Low self-esteem is like a distorted belief system which gives rise to a set of feelings. These cognitive structures and accompanying feelings shape our interaction with others and with life.

Mowrer figures that we use up so much of our psychic energy keeping our sins hidden, we have little energy left to solve the ordinary problems of life. Free us from our guilt and our low self-esteem, and we will free up enough energy to solve the problems that brought us to psychotherapy. What Mowrer has "discovered" here is the age-old Christian insight that it is beneficial or helpful both religiously and psychologically to confess our sins and to experience the liberating power of forgiveness.

What Mowrer says makes sense. If we are honest, we will admit that we are all sinners. The apostle Paul reminds us in Romans 3:23, "We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Guilt is the feeling that comes from being aware of our sins, of the gap between who we are and who God calls us to be. As the Buddhists say, anxiety is the experience of the gap between the ideal and the real. These feelings are helpful feelings because they call us back to our true center.

What is it like to feel forgiven? To feel forgiven is to have a burden lifted from our shoulders. Forgiveness frees us to respond to God out of love and gratitude, not out of fear and guilt. Forgiveness creates wholeness out of brokenness. The liberating words of many of Jesus' healing miracles were not, "Your body is healed," but "Your sins are forgiven." The forgiveness of sins must be more important than the healing of bodies for the experience of healing often follows the experience of forgiveness.

The freeing experience of forgiveness is beautifully expressed in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. In this story, a mariner shoots an albatross for sheer sport, and is punished by being forced to wear the dead bird around his neck. As this great bird, the symbol of his sin, hangs about him, the winds cease and the ship is becalmed. The sailors die of thirst because this man has committed a sin and because he cannot let it go. The death of his fellow sailors reminds us that our sins hurt other people.

The mariner is unable to save himself, unable to remove the dead bird from his neck. Alone on the ship, dying of thirst, he begins to feel at one with the little animals of the sea, the little animals from whom he felt distant and whom he felt were his to kill as

he desired. In a prayer that arises spontaneously from his heart, he suddenly blesses the little fishes of the sea. At that moment, the albatross falls from his neck. The forgiveness came from his prayer, and the prayer came from the love, the mystical experience of oneness with God's creatures that he had never previously experienced.

In one of the most beautiful descriptions of the relationship between forgiveness, love, and prayer to appear in literature, Coleridge tells us:

*He prayeth well who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.
He prayeth best who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.*

When our prayer arises from love, we are forgiven. At that moment the albatross falls from our neck. At that moment other people stop carrying the weight of our sins. And at that moment, the spirit or breath of God can once again begin to fill our sails.

Certain consequences should follow the experience of forgiveness. Since God forgives us, we ought to forgive others. Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As many as seven times?" Jesus answers him, "Not seven times, I tell you, but seventy times seven." Forgiving others is an integral part of the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Jesus' teaching of this prayer in Matthew ends with the following admonition, "Yes, if you forgive others their failings, your heavenly father will forgive you yours; but if you do not forgive others, your father will not forgive your failings either."

People who can't forgive others usually don't feel forgiven. They need to hold onto other people's faults because they still feel the unbearable weight of their own. They need this power over other people; they need it to stay "on top," and they exercise it to the point of strangling their relationships. If you have difficulty forgiving others, maybe you don't feel forgiven.

There is a second consequence to forgiveness. If we can't forgive, we can't love. It's as simple as that. Bitterness and resentment, which come from not being able to forgive, shut off all other feelings, placing them entirely out of reach. Bitterness and resentment will dry us up inside; they will shut us off from other people. The experience

of forgiveness is not only a liberating experience for us; the act of forgiving another person liberates our feelings toward that person. If we can't forgive someone else for his/her failings, there's not a chance that we will be able to love that person.

Many of us go through life feeling guilty, and many of us go through life feeling bitter. They are two sides of the same coin. Some of us can't bring ourselves to forgive our very human, very wounded parents for the abuse or neglect we suffered in childhood. Some of us can't forgive our husband or wife for some hurtful act, or for just for being who they are. Some of us can't forgive our children for some disappointment, some fantasy on our part that the child never lives out as reality. We remain stuck in our bitterness and resentment, and the relationship slowly dies.

If we can't forgive, we can't love. Strange as it seems, some of us can't even forgive God. We can't forgive God for not making life smoother, more pleasant and happy. We hold a grudge against God for the death of a loved one. If we hold a grudge against God, we will never know what it means to love God. If we hold a grudge against God, we will never know what it means to love life.

In our scripture reading from Luke, Jesus says of the woman, who is believed by some biblical scholars to be Mary Magdalene, "Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little." Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." If we do not feel forgiven by God, it is impossible to feel love. If we cannot forgive others, it is impossible for us to love them. The message of the gospel is the liberating, the freeing experience of forgiveness.

Since God freely forgives us, thereby freeing us to become the persons we should be, then we ought to be able to forgive ourselves. Sometimes this is the most difficult of all forgiveness. We cling to our sins, even identify ourselves by them, as if God were wrong in forgiving us. We cling to them almost as if we wouldn't know how to live without feeling guilty, without feeling burdened. There are two sides to forgiveness--the act of forgiving, and the act of receiving forgiveness. Forgiveness means nothing if we can't accept it and feel it, if we persist in clinging to the old way of life.

As we see in the account of the woman who approached Jesus, forgiveness begins with repentance, with honestly owning, honestly facing up to our sins, just as Mowrer's clients were asked to do the minute they came into his office. Perhaps as we reflect upon

the forgiveness that Jesus offered to the woman, to Peter, to the disciples, to Judas, and to those who crucified him, we could follow Mowrer's advice. We can think about the five worst sins we've committed and bring them to God for forgiveness. The message of the Gospel is that when we do this, we will experience the liberating power of God's forgiveness.

When we do this, we will truly experience God's love in a way that we never have before!

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