

Date: February 19, 2006

SUNDAY: Ordinary 7

SERMON: Freedom in Forgiveness

Text(s): Isaiah 43:18-25; Mark 2:1-12

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A Sunday School teacher was trying valiantly to impart some knowledge of spiritual truth to her overly-energetic third and fourth-grade students. The lesson that day was on forgiveness. She made the point that we all do wrong things sometimes and need forgiveness. These wrong things that we do are what the Bible calls sins, and she assured them that God is always willing to forgive us when we are sorry for our sins and ask for forgiveness. In a variety of ways, she engaged the children on this matter, and finally, she summed up the lesson by saying, “Now let’s review what we’ve just learned. Who can tell me what we have to do before we can receive God’s forgiveness for our sins?”

There was a moment of awkward silence, and then one little girl timidly raised her hand and said, “Sin?”

Perhaps that logic explains Martin Luther’s famous exhortation that we should “sin boldly.”

Sin is not a word we use in a serious sense much these days, is it? We often use it more in joking than we do in serious conversation. We just really don’t have much of a place for it in our consciousness. It was about thirty years ago or so that the famous psychiatrist Karl Menninger wrote his best-selling book *Whatever Became of Sin?*, in which he lamented the loss of the language of sin and guilt and forgiveness in our culture. It was his contention that guilt had become such a negative word, had gotten such bad press, that guilt itself was treated as an emotional disorder rather than as the normal response of moral beings who felt that they had fallen afoul of their consciences, and therefore, of God.

But there is real moral guilt, as Menninger recognized, and by culturally willing it out of

existence, in a sense, not only does not eliminate it from our experience, but actually deprives us of significant tools for healing of much of our emotional distress. In a real way, the loss of the concept of sin from our language and consciousness is a loss of something fundamental to our humanity—our understanding of ourselves as moral beings. All interactions between ourselves and others are moral in character. Every day, in a variety of settings, we are faced with decisions that have moral dimensions. That is, they have consequences both for ourselves and for others that are either life-giving or life-destroying. When we become aware that we have crossed a line in our actions, that we have done or said something that damages a relationship or is destructive to ourselves or another person, then we feel guilty, and those feelings may be a signal that we need to do something to mend the relationship.

Not all guilt, of course, is real moral guilt. A lot of guilt is what we might call neurotic guilt—we feel guilty even when we haven’t done anything wrong. Some of that is undoubtedly due to childhood experiences or patterns in our upbringing that made us feel unworthy or inadequate. It’s our own inner child chastising us. That’s not the sort of guilt Menninger is talking about. He’s talking about the things we say or do that violate our relationships to others, that actually cause real harm to ourselves or others?

If we are persons of faith, that is, if we live our lives intentionally with God as the Ultimate Reference point for our moral decisions and actions, then the question of how our relationship with God can be put right again after we have made the wrong moral choice and incurred real guilt, becomes very pressing and personal. What must we do to be saved? What must we do, not only about our specific sins, but about the fact that we *are* sinners— we are all people who make bad moral decisions from time to time? What do we have to do, as that Sunday School teacher asked her class, *before* we can receive God’s forgiveness for our sins?

Well, if our two scripture lessons today and the witness of the saints and theologians down through the ages are to be believed, the answer is “nothing at all.” Wait a minute, you say, what about repentance, what about asking God for forgiveness, what about being sorry for what we’ve done wrong? What do you mean “nothing at all?” Isn’t that what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace?” Well, being sorry and repenting and asking God and anyone else we’ve wronged for forgiveness are all very important, but very frequently, we get the order of things wrong. In our minds, we see those things as the things we have to do *before* God will forgive us. What our lessons affirm is that God has already forgiven us. All that is necessary for restoring of right relationships throughout the whole universe has already been done. God does not need to be begged or cajoled or convinced to effect reconciliation between us and other people, or between us and God. We are, as Martin Luther insisted, *simul justus et peccator*— at the same time, justified and sinners. Confession and repentance are what *we* need in order for us to fully experience that forgiveness; they are not what God needs.

The people of Israel who were sitting in exile in Babylon needed to be reminded of that. The common understanding they had arrived at was that they— Israel— had sinned, and God had punished them for their sins by allowing the Temple in Jerusalem to be destroyed and they themselves to be carried off into exile. That’s a fairly common notion in our day as well, isn’t it? And it’s not only Pat Robertson who thinks so, even though he carries the theme to its most absurd extremes. Don’t many of us either consciously or unconsciously ask what we or someone else has done to deserve something bad that happens? I don’t think the people of Isaiah’s day had cornered the market on bad theology.

I remember a dear old saint in one of my previous congregations, who had been a pillar of the church most of her life. She was a tireless

worker, and gave of herself to others very unselfishly. When she was in her mid-eighties, she tripped coming out of her apartment and fell, and broke her hip. It’s a common accident that many people have, and her fracture was not particularly bad; within a matter of weeks she was walking again. But every time I visited her during the time she was in the hospital and in the rehab center for two weeks getting physical therapy and for the several months after that when she was still more or less confined to her house, she’d say, “Well, I don’t know what I did wrong, pastor, but it must have been pretty bad for God to be punishing me like this.” And no matter how many times I assured her that God didn’t break her hip as punishment, the message never quite got through. In her theology, bad things happened to bad people, and even though she didn’t feel like a bad person nor was she aware of anything particularly bad she had done, she knew she must have done something, because this bad thing had happened to her.

The prophet addresses this wrong-headed theology of sin and forgiveness. Get rid of your old ways of thinking, he tells, them. God says, “*Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; I will make a road in the wilderness and springs of water in the desert. . . I did not burden you with offerings or weary you with demands for incense. I, I am the One who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.*”

Yes, you’ve sinned, God says, but don’t sit around trying to figure out how to make it right. I’ve already done that. I forgive you, not because you deserve it, but for my own sake. Because I’m God. Because I am being true to my own nature, I blot out your transgressions. I will not remember your sins. I am continually creating a new reality, I am doing a new thing. So don’t sit there in sackcloth and ashes; get up and get on with it. Get moving. There is a road home through the wilderness; there are springs of

water waiting for you in the desert. You're forgiven already. The road to freedom beckons.

We confront the same astonishing notion in our Gospel lesson. Some people who have a friend who's paralyzed bring him to Jesus in the hope that Jesus can heal him, and when they can't get through the crowd around the door, they go up on the flat roof and begin to dig through the roof to let this man on his pallet down through the ceiling on ropes so that Jesus can heal him. Now this is where we have to pay close attention to what Mark says. *When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.* Isn't that a rather odd thing to say in this situation? Obviously, the theologians and canon lawyers—the scribes of the law—who were in the audience thought so too. *Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 'Why does this fellow speak like this? This is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?''* Who indeed! That's the crucial question here. And there are several important things to notice that clue us in to Mark's point in telling this story.

First is that Jesus' first word to the paralyzed man was not, "Are you ready to repent of your sins?" It was not, "Do you want to be healed?" It was not, "Do you have enough faith?" The first word of Jesus to this man is "Your sins are forgiven." It's not Jesus who is forgiving his sins at that moment; Jesus is simply reminding him of what is already so—God's forgiveness already freely given. the starting point for whatever happens next

Now, we have to be careful not to read into this story our modern understandings of the psychological relationship between guilt and physical illness. Mark is not trying to make a case that the man's condition was a psychosomatic paralysis, and that what Jesus was really doing was perceiving that if he released the man from his feelings of guilt, then his paralysis would go away. That may or may not be so, but it's not Mark's point in telling this story.

No, Mark's point is at once much simpler, and much more profound. The clue is in Jesus' statement to the skeptical scribes, "*But that you may know that a mortal has authority on earth to forgive sins. . .*" It's not just God who has such authority; any human being has authority to forgive sins. In fact, since God has already declared us forgiven, the only way in which we can come to experience that divine forgiveness is in the experience of offering and receiving forgiveness from one another. St. Matthew makes the same point in his gospel when he has Jesus giving St. Peter the "keys to the kingdom of heaven" and tells him that "*whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*" St. John also affirms this in his gospel, when the risen Jesus appears to his disciples on Easter evening and says, "*Receive the Holy Spirit. Whoever's sins you forgive, they are forgiven, and whoever's sins you retain, they are retained.*" When we offer or receive forgiveness, we are, in effect, bringing ourselves into line with what God has already done to effect the reconciliation of all things, to set right all things that are wrong throughout the universe.

Interesting, isn't it, that it's the religious people in the crowd who get it wrong? They're prepared to view the man's paralysis as somehow related to his moral condition. But Jesus says, "*Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say 'Your sins are forgiven' or 'Rise, take up your pallet and walk?' But so that you will know that a mortal has authority on earth to forgive sins,—he said to the paralytic— 'I say to you, rise, take up your mat and go home.'* And he stood up, and immediately took his mat and went out before all of them."

You and I have the authority to forgive the sins of someone else. You and I can really know God's forgiveness when we are forgiven by someone else. Isn't that a remarkable thing? The biblical word for this is grace. God does not become gracious when we decide to repent. God

is gracious. Our ability to feel guilt for our wrongdoings, our ability to feel remorse and decide to amend our ways, our ability to experience a sense of release and freedom when we do confess our wrongs—these are the results of God’s grace, not the conditions for it. The forgiving grace of God is the very air that we breathe. And all of us have the authority to mediate that grace to one another. In fact, the only way any of us will actually experience the forgiveness of God will be when we receive forgiveness from one another. That’s what Jesus understood so clearly, and why he could so boldly say to the paralyzed man, “*Your sins are forgiven.*” Your paralysis is not a punishment for your sins. God doesn’t give us what we deserve. God forgives us in order to be true to God’s own nature. So be free. Be free from the burden of guilt. Be free from the burden of feeling that you’re getting what you deserve. Be free from the burden of thinking that you have to meet the preconditions before God will be gracious to you. That’s the old human way of thinking. God is a the One who is doing a new thing. Your sins are forgiven. Rise up and walk.

We will always need Bonhoeffer’s reminder that God’s grace is not cheap; it is, in fact, very costly in what it demands of us. But, while grace is not cheap, it is always free. It is the task of learning how to live in the freedom of that grace that is the substance of the Christian life, and that’s where the cost comes in. This is not an easy task, because we are bound with many chains—the chains of both real and neurotic guilt, the chains of resentment and bitterness and hidden angers, the chains of wounded self-images, the chains of compulsive behaviors and deeply entrenched habits of the heart that we only dimly understand, the chains of addictions that enslave us. Forgiveness seems like a far off dream or fantasy. Can we be forgiven? Can we forgive others?

The good news is that we *are* forgiven, and that we have the enormous privilege and

responsibility of offering that gift to others. And if we can hear that good news we will find our freedom— what St. Paul calls “*the glorious liberty of the children of God.*”