

Sermon Title: The drama of forgiveness

Text: Psalm 32 and Luke 15

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Blessed is the one whose sins are forgiven.
Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them.

We are blessed.
Humanity is blessed.
All of humanity, past, present, future are blessed.

Could it be that Jesus makes an offer of unconditional forgiveness?
That is there is no insistence to repent or to make amends?

Could it be that God lifts up God's robes and runs down the street to embrace us,
every time we mess up?
Does God not look to settle accounts?
Or is God's forgiveness free?

And if forgiveness is gift.
Then every one of us is blessed.

And we are a confessing people

In the church we are invited into a grand drama of forgiveness.

A drama we go on enacting
- where we are the characters who receive what has already been given.

This, my friends, is the script of our Sunday morning service.
Prayers, songs, signs, and announcements that remind us that we are blessed with the gift of forgiveness. And that impart this 'already given' grace to us.

One writer puts it like this:

"God gives Godself to us as love made visible.
And love is constantly seeking sign-acts by which to reveal itself.

Think of a kiss - it's an act, a rather strange phenomenon really. Where two pairs of lips meet. It is an act that expresses love.

Soon distinctions between the act and love itself soon disappear.
And the kiss becomes love itself; the act is part of the emotion.
The loving deed is love made visible."

White Christian Liturgy

Our liturgy, the act of confession, of saying the words, of receiving bread and wine are such a mystery.

Yet we know this - they are God's love and free gift of grace made visible to us.

So... Does God need us to participate in order to give the gift of forgiveness?
I don't believe so.

And this is where the church has historically given mixed messages...

First - There have been times when the church turned guilt into shame.

Let's be clear...

We sin, we are not sinners.

Sin is any act that separates us from being in relationship.

With God, with ourselves, with others, with the created world.

Sin is what we do. It is not who we are.

Guilt is I did something bad.

Shame is I am bad.

Psalm 32 is a prayer that expresses the delight in having the weight of guilt lifted from our shoulders as we receive the forgiveness and love from a gracious God.

And it also expresses some of the pain of shame - of bones wasting away, of silence.
Of perhaps over associating ourselves with an act of wrongdoing.

Social scientist, Brene Brown writes:

"Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging"

Brene Brown on Shame in Daring Greatly.

And you, you and I, are more valuable than the worst thing we have done.

Let us internalize this image - an image of God running toward us, whenever we return, no matter what we have done, no matter how many times...

God's posture toward us is forgiveness. A self-giving, a movement toward.

Second: There have been times when the church has historically conflated confession and forgiveness:

Our confession is not necessary for God's forgiveness.

Commenting on Rembrandt's beautiful painting of The Return of the Prodigal Son, Henri Nouwen writes:

"The parable of the prodigal son is a story that speaks about a love that existed before any rejection was possible and that will still be there after all rejections have taken place. It is the first and everlasting love of a God who is Father as well as Mother. It is the fountain of all true human love... In Rembrandt's painting we are given a glimpse of that love. It is the love that always welcomes home and always wants to celebrate."

And third: There have been times when the church based the process of forgiveness on an angry Feudal Lord system of economic exchange.

This has been called Atonement Theology or Payment Theology.

And it was first fully articulated in 1098 by a brilliant monk, priest, abbot and Archbishop of Canterbury, and later a saint named - Anselm (1033 - 1109). He used a model from his cultural-historical context, namely, the relationship between a feudal lord and his subjects.

When a subject violated the lord's law, the lord could not simply forgive if he wanted to. For to do so would promote anarchy by suggesting that disobedience wasn't very serious. Instead, payment, satisfaction, and compensation must be made. The honour of the lord and the order of his law had to be preserved.

Anselm applied this model to our relationship with God. If God were to forgive sins without payment for disobedience, it would suggest that sin doesn't matter very much to God. Payment must be made. Hence the necessity for Jesus' life and death.

The payment (atonement) understanding of Jesus' death also generates serious theological problems when it is understood as the real or ultimate reason for Jesus death.:

- it makes Jesus death part of God's plan. Was it God who killed Jesus?
- It emphasizes God's wrath - Is God like the authoritarian king/parent/feudal lord?
- It makes the death of Jesus the most important thing about him

The death of Jesus is important - following the way of Jesus is more important. And God's posture is and always has been one of love and forgiveness toward Humanity.

Marcus Borg Convictions: How I learned What Matters Most

So why confess?

What is this grand drama of forgiveness?

We need to be reminded that we are forgiven.

We need practices to let go,

We need to enact receiving grace.

We need visible, embodied ways that bring this reality into our awareness.

And we need to practice.

For Confession, Forgiveness, Reconciliation...
is not only something occurring between God and us.

It is also what we need to do with each other.

Michael Battle writes that

“Unless we practice living in this atmosphere of reconciliation, the gift of reunion will be too painful for us. Adapting to God's ways, breathing in the atmosphere of God, enables reunion between us... In the end, the inhabitation of reconciliation exemplified by Jesus takes us beyond the atmosphere of a violent world and back into the intention of God's life for all of us” (p. 46).

Michael Battle - Practicing Reconciliation in a violent world

And in our enacting the grand drama of a forgiving God - we realize that we too can embrace forgiveness between each other:

And it is not easy...

“Forgiveness is a heartache and difficult to achieve because strangely, it not only refuses to eliminate the original wound, but actually draws us closer to it”

David Whyte Consolations

But there is a pathway:

Contrition - feeling the pain of what we have done and what has been done to us.
Saint Ambrose: Purify yourself with tears - wash yourself with mourning.

Confession - Articulation of remorse.
Saint Augustine: The confession of evil works is the first beginning of good works.

Forgiveness - The deliberate opening of ourselves to that which heals and restores us
We cannot make forgiveness happen, it is a gift of God. But it is a gift we can be open to receiving.

Saint Faustina: The one who knows how to forgive prepares for themselves for many graces from God.

And that is the invitation.

That the drama doesn't stop is what has already been given.

But that extends into the way that we live with each other.

To weep, to name how we wrong and have been wronged, and to live into the possibility of mercy and love.

So...

Will you tell me when I have hurt you, so that I may weep?

Will you allow me to tell you when I am hurting?

Will you hear my words when I say I am sorry?

Will you wait with me for the possibility of forgiveness?

Will you choose with me to enact mercy and love?