

Me First

March 6, 2016

Psalm 32; Luke 15

In the *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, Psalm thirty-two is titled, “The Joy of Forgiveness.” Joy...and...forgiveness—people have trouble putting those words together. Most people associate forgiveness with pain, struggle, and resistance.

We focus on forgiving others rather than being forgiven. Forgiving others can be distasteful, distressing, and just plain hard. We would rather focus on the sins of others than on our own sins.

Let me illustrate. In our prison ministry in Lincoln, I twice taught a class on forgiving and being forgiven. The room was filled with thieves and cheaters, drug dealers and extortionists. Many had stolen from friends, beaten up co-workers and abandoned their families.

And yet, they wanted to spend their hours of discussion on how to forgive all the people who had wronged them!

I was astonished by this denial and self-deception. Then I looked in the mirror. I am no different. “Exposing someone else’s sin to light is a clever trick,” writes Peter Marty in this month’s *Lutheran* magazine, “for avoiding a candid look at the soiled or unseemly self that resides darkly within us.”

Forgiveness is for me first. Take that main thought home with you today. **Forgiveness is for me first.**

The psalmist writes like a modern psychotherapist. “*While I kept silence,*” the poet writes, “*my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.*” The psalmist understood a powerful truth. We are as sick as our secrets.

Guilt and shame—deeply buried and firmly denied—take a toll on us spiritually, emotionally and even physically. Keeping God at arm’s length wears on us “*My strength was dried up,*” the poet writes, “*as by the heat of summer.*” Keeping God at arm’s length to deny our own brokenness—that will eat us alive from the inside out.

In his wonderful book on forgiveness, Miroslav Volf puts it clearly. “To forgive is first of all to accuse.” If we have done nothing wrong, there is nothing to be forgiven. If we accept forgiveness, we admit we are in the wrong. Is it any wonder we resist the gift of forgiveness, whether it comes from God or someone else?

NCIS has become one of the most successful television franchises in history. Mark Harmon plays the lead character, Jethro Gibbs, with poise and power. I have a problem with one of the favorite sayings of that lead character. “Don’t say you’re sorry,” Gibbs, tells his underlings. “It’s a sign of weakness.” That is precisely what we believe in this culture where vengeance is a virtue and forgiving is for fools.

We Christians should know better than that. “*If we say that we have not sinned,*” says the First Letter of John, “*we make [God] a liar, and [God’s] word is not in us*” (1 John 1:10). When I confess my sin to God, that’s not weakness. That’s the ruthless honesty that comes from the courage of faith.

Forgiveness is for me first.

Forgiveness travels a two-way street. If I am unwilling to be forgiven, I will have no power to forgive. If I will not forgive others, I cannot receive forgiveness myself. If I have no room in my heart for others, I will have no room for Jesus.

We pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." That's not a consumer transaction. That's a spiritual truth. Forgiveness travels both directions, or it travels not at all.

Forgiveness is for me first.

It is the gift of Resurrection Life that makes being forgiven possible. In the Parable of the Prodigal, the forgiving father makes it clear: "*this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!*"

One of my favorite images of this parable is a painting by Rembrandt. That painting deserves meditation and deep reflection. I see the compassionate love in the face and the hands of the father. I see the remnants of shattered shoes at the feet of the younger son. I see the cross-armed disgust of the older son as he stew in self-righteousness.

I am reminded of the words that launch this fifteenth chapter of Luke's gospel. Jesus' opponents are stewing in their own self-righteousness. "*This man,*" they shudder, "*this man welcomes sinners and eats with them!*" Their words drip with disgust.

The Greek word for "welcome" is so wonderful. It means "to receive someone toward oneself." It is a physical word—hands reaching out, grabbing the sinner and pulling us toward one's bosom. Rembrandt understands this word in his painting.

It's a good thing Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. In a few moments we're going to have our weekly festival for big fat sinners. Jesus feeds you and me with his life and love. That's what Holy Communion is. We come with confidence as forgiven sinners, not as worthy worshipers.

Forgiveness is for me first.

Being forgiven is the task of a lifetime. It is also God's profound gift that makes it possible for the sinner to repent and become a conduit of God's forgiving love for others. Forgiving and being forgiven are concrete tokens of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I cannot do more than brush the surface in this message on forgiving and being forgiven. If you want more, I can steer you toward a book I wrote on the subject several years ago. It is available in hard copy and as an e-book.

Bishop N. T. Wright says it so well. "God in his gentle love longs to set us free from the prison we have stumbled into—the loveless prison where we refused both the offer and the demand of forgiveness." The forgiving father frees the prodigal son from that loveless prison—the prison of a story where forgiving is impossible. The result of forgiveness is new life here and now. Forgiveness is the Resurrection accepted, embodied, and applied.

Forgiveness is for me first. Let's pray...

Pastor Lowell R. Hennigs
Emanuel Lutheran Church
Council Bluffs, Iowa