

“Forgiveness”

Psalm 51 (NRSV)

Lent V - Wednesday, April 13, 2011

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Psalm 51 is perhaps one of the most recognizable passages in the book of Psalms. It is integrated repeatedly into our Christian beliefs and Lutheran theology. Forgiveness is the crux of why Christ died on the cross, and if we were to open the front of the red hymnal right now, we would see song after song and prayer after prayer quoting pieces of this passage:

- ¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
¹¹Do not cast me away from your presence
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Sound familiar?

Psalm 51 is such a vital message in framing how we see our relationship with God and need for Christ’s sacrifice that on Ash Wednesday, we kicked off Lent 2011 with its words. Tonight we are on the cusp of Holy Week, a week designed for repentance and forgiveness, and are once again celebrating the wonder of this prayer.

Psalm 51 is not only a part of our culture, in many ways, its words of forgiveness are a part of who we are. So why is it, then, so hard to fathom that forgiveness is real?

When I was preparing for tonight, I really struggled with finding the right words to say. My boss, a pastor, always says that the two hardest sermons to preach are Christmas and Easter because everyone already knows what you’re going to say. I didn’t really understand what he meant until I tried to tackle Psalm 51. How can I make the topic of forgiveness new and refreshing? What can I say to make the good news of our salvation connect in a way that is innovative and unique?

I kept writing and re-writing this sermon, and was admittedly freaking out quite a bit a few days ago when I realized I hated everything I had written. I decided to start from scratch. So naturally, when I truly needed peace to gain some focus, I fell into one of those crazy days. I overslept, which was especially taxing because I needed to finish printing a bulletin for a funeral service that started at 11 am. My boss’s preparation style is the opposite of Pastor Doug, and as such is the ultimate last minute guy, causing me to finish an hour before the service. As Murphy’s Law would have it, the printer jammed halfway through printing, the organist called and said he had a flat tire, and no matter what I tried to do, I kept getting interrupted by guests visiting our Food Pantry asking me for bus passes.

Finally, everything came together at the last minute and the service started on time. I was about to go to the Sanctuary to celebrate the life of a member who had always been very good to me when the door to my office opened.

I oversee Pilgrim's ministry with InterAct Cleveland, an organization that helps families of poverty. Over the past year, I orchestrated Pilgrim's involvement in the 2011 Homeless Stand Down, a three day event sponsored by InterAct. The person in my office was one of their staff members, Gwenⁱ, and as soon as I saw her I could see she had been physically attacked. Gwen needed medical and police assistance, but couldn't bring herself to go alone. She told me she was assaulted by her husband, and had come to the church for support in the painful next steps of reporting him. Suddenly, my morning troubles seemed so trivial. Normally, this request would have gone directly to Pilgrim's only pastor, but he was in the middle of presiding over a funeral service. I work intimately with Gwen, and knew what it had cost her to ask for help. I could not find it in my heart to tell her to wait alone for the service to be over. I waited with her until the pastor was free, and in her distress, she began to tell me what happened. For a variety of reasons, it was hard to hear Gwen's story and be there when she relived her experience. I wished myself anywhere else but by her side, eagerly watching the door for my boss. I thought thoughts about her husband that made me glad I learned to hold my tongue. I did not feel like a loving Christian that day, my anger keeping me far from God and even farther from the forgiving spirit I strive to hold.

After what seemed like an eternity, I got a text from the pastor saying he was heading down the hall. When I told Gwen he was coming, she turned to me and asked, "Will you stay? I'm afraid he will say that I need to forgive, and I can't deal with that right now. All I want to know is that I will be forgiven."

I was shocked. For the life of me I couldn't understand why she felt the blame lay with her, and why she felt there was an expectation of her. I told her that no one thought what happened was her fault, and she said, "It is my fault. I should have known better. I have lived my life telling people how to make good choices, helping women take the hard road to safety instead of falling to drugs, sex, and bad relationships – and look where I am. God must be so ashamed."

While hopefully most of us haven't personally experienced Gwen's pain, we may relate to the feeling that we have invited bad, unforgivable forces into our lives. Looking back at hard times, we can feel that we have let ourselves and God down, and we deserve to experience negative consequences. We believe that our past not only shapes how we will behave in our future, but that our proverbial cards are dealt according to that past. Our psalmist feels this way, too, and says:

³For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
⁴Against you, you alone I have sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.

But this is the true mystery of Christ dying on the cross – we are not punished for our bad choices. Jesus is our eternal sacrifice, which means that no matter how we neglect ourselves, how we make the same mistakes day after day, what sort of people we choose to let in our lives or people we should but can't quite push away, God is not ashamed. Those mistakes are forgiven;

unquestionably, with no explanations. We may want to punish ourselves, we may want to be like Gwen and think that we have somehow invited a bad thing into our lives because we deserve suffering, but believing that and living that way is a direct contradiction to what we will celebrate on Easter. The psalmist knows that our merciful God does not punish the faithful but asks that we be honest with our feelings, whether they are good or bad:

¹⁶For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.
¹⁷The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God,
you will not despise.

There is no question that when we are in the pit of our despair, when we are hurting, when we know that we have lived sinfully and done others wrong, when we regret loving someone who causes more harm than good, we can doubt forgiveness is real. It is natural to have feelings of doubt because such forgiveness is not of this world. It is a gift that can only be given from a benevolent and just Creator.

There is a great line by a contemporary band named Lincoln Park who says “when the paper’s crumpled up, it can’t be perfect again.” This is why we doubt forgiveness – we believe that when the paper of our soul is crumpled with sin we will never be perfect again. We believe that the wrinkles of our mistakes will leave others questioning our value, and that those mistakes justify the negative situations that arise. But God never promised that we would be perfect, merely that we would be forgiven. A paper that is crumpled can still be smoothed out and carry the words of a new story.

This is why the psalmist begs for mercy and asks for God to create in him a clean heart. He acknowledges that he is flawed, and has faith that his future will not be bound by his past:

⁶You desire truth in the inward being
Therefore teach me wisdom of my secret heart.
⁷Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be made clean;
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Someone recently asked me how I knew forgiveness was real. I told them that I can only speak from my own reality, and there is absolutely no way God could be calling me to pastor his people if he hadn’t forgiven me for the choices of my past. There is no way I could have been granted the privilege of sitting with Gwen, witnessing her bravery, being a humble guest to an intimate part of her life if God didn’t see me through the eyes of forgiveness.

We all have living testaments of forgiveness dusting our realities. Whether it is the joy of being a parent, having enough money to put food on our table, being able to gather together in this sacred fellowship week after week, or merely feeling the warm spring air kiss our cheeks, these gifts are testaments that God has put our past behind us, and our future before us.

What we learn from Psalm 51 is that in our prayer, we should not forget our sin. The psalmist tells us that God does not ask us to be perfect, but to trust that his love is beyond our understanding. It is through remembering our sin we can truly feel the gift of forgiveness, and be resurrected in the knowledge that God's merciful love for us is without condition.

Our final meditation is called "The Forgiveness of Sinsⁱⁱ"

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God,
and God abides in them.

Love is patient; love is kind.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God,
and God abides in them.

Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

God is love.

Love is not irritable; love does not keep track of wrongs.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God,
and God abides in them.

Love does not keep track of wrongs.

Amen.

ⁱ Name changed for to protect privacy

ⁱⁱ Cherwin, Susan Palo; *Crossings: Meditations for Worship*, Morning Star Music Publications, St Louis, MO 2003