

You Are Forgiven. No Matter What.
Sunday, December 5, 2021, 11:30 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

You are forgiven.
You are forgiven.
You are forgiven.
You are forgiven.

+

Maybe nobody knows it.

Maybe only a few people know it.

Maybe everybody knows it.

But you know it. And that's enough.

What is the worst thing you have done, the worst thing you have said?

Is it a something done in a moment of weakness or something you planned or something you did over and over again?

Is it a moment you wish you could have back?

A moment when you didn't step forward when you could have or remained silent in the face of injustice – or maybe when you said something that now can never be unsaid.

Do you play it back in your mind again and again ... or do you bury it deep and try to pretend it never happened?

What is it?

What is the thing that convinces you that if everyone knew it about you, nobody would love you?

What is the thing that most tries to convince you that you are unlovable yourself?

What is the secret you most fear being known?

What is the regret that is buried deepest in your heart?

Maybe as soon as I began talking about it, you knew what it was.

Or maybe not.

We can bury these things so deep, not only in memory but in rationalization, that they can almost seem like they aren't there at all.

Almost.

So, what is it for you?

I'm not going to ask you to say it out loud.

I'm not going to ask you to tell a soul.

I'm just going to ask you to bring it to mind, to let it rest on your heart.

To trust that you are not alone ... that every person in this room has something.

And then... I'm going to invite you to consider, whatever it is, that these three words are true.

You. Are. Forgiven.

Now your reaction might be, "it's not that easy". ... and to that I'll say, you're right. It's not.

And ... the challenge might not be what we think it is.

The challenge of forgiveness is not earning it.

The challenge of forgiveness is accepting it. Is trusting it.

The challenge of forgiveness is letting it take root deep inside us in ways that heal us, transform us, and set us free.

It is Advent, and so we are once again back in the wilderness with John the Baptist ... and we hear his familiar cry. And what do we hear John the Baptist say:

Repent!

Repent!

He is the wild man in the desert and on the street corners in the New Yorker cartoons.

Repent!

Repent!

That is our image of John the Baptist. After all, that's what's in the Gospel right? It's right there ...

“John went through the entire region of the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

The message is clear. Repent! You are bad. Or at least you have done something bad enough to disqualify you from being good.

Confess your sin.

Pay the penalty.

And maybe, maybe ... just maybe ... you can approach being worthy of love.

At least that's what the church has done with the message of John the Baptist.

At least that's the message I've heard my whole life.

Sin is something that we need to be saved from. And we are unworthy except through the magnanimity of God.

I got it from both sides growing up.

In my Christian upbringing, forgiveness of sin was something we needed to beg from God, something we needed to earn from God with true repentance ... not just saying we were sorry but being appropriately grieved and paying appropriate penance.

In my Self Realization Fellowship upbringing, the response to sin was karma ... the idea that sin created a weight on your soul that you yourself had to work off like they were unwanted fat cells. The more you did wrong, the further you were from God and the more work you had to do to get closer.

Truly, churches are the birthplace of cancel culture.

And it's convenient, really ... if spiritually toxic.

Convenient because it allows the church ... any church ... to set the terms for our acceptability and lovability. It allows the institution of the church perpetually to have power over us – the people of the church – by not only deciding when we have qualified for forgiveness ... but by defining what needs forgiving in the first place.

And so, as a duly ordained leader of the institution of the church – i.e. historically “part of the problem” – let me say, once more, with feeling:

You. Are. Forgiven.

Without. Doing. Anything.

No. Matter. What.

That's what was revolutionary about John the Baptist. And that is what is revolutionary about Jesus. That God's love, God's forgiveness ... these things don't have to be earned and they can never be withheld. They are ours, forever ... and they cannot be taken away.

"John went through the entire region of the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

For millennia as the church, we have focused on that word "repentance" ... when Jesus focused on the word "forgiveness."

Forgiveness is Jesus saying you don't have to be made worthy to have a seat at Christ's table. The seat is there for you. Waiting. Christ yearning for you to take it.

Forgiveness is Jesus saying, "Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Not some of you. All of you. Not if you do these things first ... just ... come."

Forgiveness is the essence of grace and grace is the essence of the revolutionary Jesus. And grace by definition cannot be earned it can only be given, freely, with deep, abiding, infinite love.

Now, we struggle mightily with this. It not only seems too good to be true ... it just seems wrong.

As human beings we construct for ourselves transactional economies. The systems we call justice say that everything has to have a cost.

We have this fear of "letting people off the hook." The fear that if we do that, the whole system will fall apart. That if we don't demand restitution before even the possibility of forgiveness there would be anarchy. That the only thing keeping us from hurting each other is fear ... the fear of consequence. The fear of retribution.

That yes, forgiveness may be possible ... but it is absolutely conditional. And if forgiveness is conditional, so is love.

These economies are so pervasive that we have even twisted the life of the one who came to free us from them into their very image, turning the grace-filled, love-without-judgment

ministry of Jesus into a mere comma in our creeds and his life into one more price that needs to be paid for forgiveness to be possible.

That theology needs to be called out for the destructive lie that it is.

And so once more, let me say.

You. Are. Forgiven.

Without. Doing. Anything.

No. Matter. What.

Because that's how God's love works.

My friend, Paul Fromberg, is a former parishioner here at All Saints and now the rector of St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco. The church gives out groceries to nearly 1,000 families a week.

Many years ago, Paul told me of this time he was standing outside as the food distribution was happening and a neighborhood boy walked up and pointed out that one of the recipients had a cell phone.

"He's not poor," the boy said. "He shouldn't be getting food."

Ignoring that people can still be poor and have a cell phone, Paul went right to the central point.

"We give food to anyone who asks. Because that's what our job is. Our job is to give."

Then something happened that Paul didn't expect. Instead of arguing, the boy's eyes got wide ... and the smile on his face got even wider.

"Cool!" he said. "That makes you invincible."

And Paul realized he was right. Because they knew their job was simply to love everyone ... nobody could trick them, nobody could play an angle on them, nobody could take advantage of them.

They were invincible.

That's the love of God. That's life in Christ. It is a life of invincibility.

You see if God's love. If God's grace. If God's forgiveness has to be earned ... then we have power over God. By our action or inaction, we can tell God who to love. We can tell God who to forgive.

But that's not who God is. God simply loves everyone ... there are no books that have to be balanced, there is no system that can be gamed.

We don't have to earn forgiveness.

God is invincible.

And that can only mean one thing.

You. Are. Forgiven.

Now, John does use the word repentance. And while it is not the most important word he says, it is there, and it is important.

And ... repentance is not a pre-requisite for forgiveness being offered. It is not something we have to do to be worthy and loved by God.

Repentance is what we need to do to accept forgiveness. It is not about moving God or earning God's love ... it is about preparing ourselves, doing what we need to do to live lives transformed by the infinite grace of an invincible God.

Because those things that we have done or not done. We need to be free of them. We've been carrying them around far too long. They are the heavy burdens that Christ bids us come and lay down.

And to do that, to receive the forgiveness that is waiting for us, we need to do something difficult things. And we always can do them together.

First, we need to look deep inside and sort through those things that are weighing on our souls and help one another distinguish between whether they are truly wrongs we have committed and for which we need to accept God's forgiveness ... or whether they are a part of our humanity for which we are being unjustly shamed by ourselves and others and for which no forgiveness is necessary.

There is a wound in our heart in either case. A wound that needs healing. A wound to which God's love and healing is waiting to be applied.

And the distinction is crucial. The church for far too long has used the word sin as a bludgeon to denigrate pieces of our humanity that despite Christ's loving embrace, it has seen fit to

disparage and condemn – leaving millennia of death and destruction in its wake. We need to stop condemning ourselves and others for just being human.

And ... as we find those wrongs we truly have committed, we need to listen deeply to the harm they have caused.

We need to name that damage we have caused.

We need to let those who have been harmed by us help us determine how to make reparation.

We need together to dedicate ourselves to new ways of being, relationships of support and accountability that not only bring healing to wounds past but do all we can to prevent new wounds from being caused in the future.

That is true justice. Restorative justice.
Justice that heals. Not justice that punishes.

Justice that converts. Not justice that condemns.

That is what happens when we start with forgiveness. When we realize our default state is belovedness. When we realize that we are forgiven not because we have repented but we repent and seek a new and healed life because we are forgiven.

When the verdict came down convicting William Bryan and Travis and Gregory McMichael for the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, I knew that our current system had rendered the closest thing to justice of which it was capable. And ... I did not rejoice that justice was done.

What was done in those convictions was not justice but the recognition of sin through assigning retribution. If Jesus was clear about anything, it was that true justice is not an eye for an eye. True justice is about going to the wound and healing the wound. And it is hard work ... frankly much harder than sentencing someone to life in prison— about as difficult a place as exists for healing to happen. It is the hard work of recognizing the humanity of those whose deeds and even personhood we find most offensive and wounding.

It's the hard work of recognizing and having mercy on our own humanity when we cannot bear what we ourselves has done.

It's why I'm convinced Jesus is a prison abolitionist.

It is the work of grace and mercy. And providing it for others is the only way we will ever know that we are worthy of it ourselves. Providing it for others is the only way each and all of us will ever be free.

Years ago, lawyer and social justice activist Bryan Stevenson stood in this pulpit and said words we have repeated many times. “Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done.”

There is a fuller context to that phrase from his book Just Mercy. Remembering a time when one of his death row clients was being executed and he was feeling his own burden of failure, Stevenson writes:

“I frequently had difficult conversations with clients who were struggling and despairing over their situations—over the things they’d done, or had been done to them, that had led them to painful moments. Whenever things got really bad, and they were questioning the value of their lives, I would remind them that each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done. I told them that if someone tells a lie, that person is not just a liar. If you take something that doesn’t belong to you, you are not just a thief. Even if you kill someone, you’re not just a killer.

“I told myself that evening what I had been telling my clients for years. I am more than broken. In fact, there is a strength, a power even, in understanding brokenness, because embracing our brokenness creates a need and desire for mercy, and perhaps a corresponding need to show mercy.

“When you experience mercy, you learn things that are hard to learn otherwise. You see things you can’t otherwise see; you hear things you can’t otherwise hear. You begin to recognize the humanity that resides in each of us.

“All of sudden, I felt stronger. I began thinking about what would happen if we all just acknowledged our brokenness, if we owned up to our weaknesses, our deficits, our biases, our fears.

“Maybe if we did, we wouldn’t want to kill the broken among us who have killed others.

“Maybe we would look harder for solutions to caring for the disabled, the abused, the neglected, and the traumatized.

“I had a notion that if we acknowledged our brokenness, we could no longer take pride in mass incarceration, in executing people, in our deliberate indifference to the most vulnerable.”

Bell Hooks writes:

“For me, forgiveness and compassion are always linked: How do we hold people accountable for wrongdoing and yet at the same time remain in touch with their humanity enough to believe in their capacity to be transformed?”

I’ll tell you how. We do it by starting with forgiveness ... and by trusting that love will hold us to account far greater than fear.

We do it by trusting ... an inch at a time ... that each of us is more than the worst thing we have ever done.

We do it by trusting three words that will set us free.

Trusting them for ourselves

Trusting them for each other.

You. Are. Forgiven.

Alleluia. Amen.