

Sermon Lent Week Four March 26, 2017

“Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters and Righteousness Like an Ever-Flowing Stream!”

A Word for All God’s Children

Each time someone is baptized, the whole church body gathered also makes vows. One of the things we promise is to be a community of love and forgiveness. Each day we must choose between letting the difficult things about life create resentment in us or allowing the work of forgiveness to make way for love. The song *“I Choose Love”* was written as a response to a modern-day act of forgiveness by an African-American church in Charleston, South Carolina, after the tragic shooting of members of their Bible study group. We are reminded of the power of Jesus’ forgiveness, even on the cross.

We Receive the Word of God

Luke 23: 32-43

They also led two other criminals to be executed with Jesus. When they arrived at the place called The Skull, they crucified Him, along with the criminals, one on His right and the other on His left. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing.” They drew lots as a way of dividing up His clothing.

The people were standing around watching, but the leaders sneered at Jesus, saying, “He saved others. Let Him save Himself if He really is the Christ sent from God, the Chosen One.”

The soldiers also mocked Jesus. They came up to Him, offering Him sour wine and saying, “If you really are the king of the Jews, save Yourself.” Above His head was a notice of the formal charge against Him. It read “This is the king of the Jews.”

One of the criminals hanging next to Jesus insulted Him: “Aren’t You the Christ? Save Yourself and us!” Responding, the other criminal spoke harshly to him, “Don’t you fear God, seeing that you’ve also been sentenced to die? We are rightly condemned, for we are receiving the appropriate sentence for what we did. But this Man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”

Jesus replied, “I assure you that today you will be with Me in paradise.”

In the movie “Witness” Harrison Ford is a New York City police officer who’s undercover in a Pennsylvania Amish community. One day Ford is in town and there are tourists there taking pictures of the Amish in their “plain” dress, and a woman points a camera at Harrison Ford. In trying to protect his cover he tells her that if she takes his picture he’s going to strangle her with her bra. This of course, gets everyone’s attention because that’s not how what’s expected to come out of the mouth of an Amish man, and it arouses suspicion... and Ford’s cover is blown. There’s a certain way

Amish people dress and talk and live in the world, and the culture around them, and even tourists who come to take pictures of them, know what it is.

Yesterday afternoon was David Hill's memorial service, and in the evening was a women's fellowship dinner at the parsonage, and I made a joke at the dinner about preaching this morning... specifically preaching about this scripture. I said that the subject was forgiveness and I was going to start my sermon by saying, "I'm going to tell you everything I know about forgiveness" and then I was going to sit down. In part this was because it's been a very full weekend, but more than that, preaching about forgiveness as an issue of justice and righteousness, because forgiving those who sin against us is so difficult - it feels somewhat like walking across a shaky bridge, and sitting down feels like the safer thing to do. I'm trusting the Holy Spirit to lead me across this bridge.

I wore my clergy shirt today because it identifies me as something... as a professional Christian. One year during Lent I wore my clergy shirt on Wednesdays as a spiritual practice, and when I went to Safeway on my way home from work I realized I had it on. I thought briefly about taking off the collar and rolling up the sleeves and pretending it was just an unfashionable shirt... and I did a quick inventory about my behavior at Safeway. I couldn't remember being snarky or impatient, so I went into my neighborhood grocery store wearing this shirt that says, "Yeah, I'm a Christian. Yeah, I'm a clergy. woman." When I wear this shirt I know something's expected of me. I wonder what it's like for a Muslim woman to wear a hijab every time she goes out, a scarf that covers her hair, that tells other people something about what to expect of her as a person of faith. What identifies us as Christians? What do others expect of us as followers of Jesus... what do we expect of each other? Forgiveness must be one of those things that identifies us and that we expect of each other because to follow Jesus is to live in faithful obedience to Him, to what He said and did. Twice in this story from Luke's gospel about Jesus' crucifixion, Jesus is identified as innocent, and yet He was executed by the Roman government in the most public, humiliating, excruciatingly painful way to die imaginable. The thief on the cross identified Jesus as innocent: "We are rightly condemned, for we are receiving the appropriate sentence for what we did. But this Man has done nothing wrong." And then the Roman centurion, who heard Jesus' last words: "Father, into Your hands I commend My Spirit," praised God and said, "Certainly this Man was innocent." There was

nothing just or right about Jesus' death but He forgave not just those who condemned Him, and hung Him there, He forgave the cruelty and stupidity and fear of all humanity. Here I am on that shaky bridge again as I ask you and me: can as Jesus' followers can we do anything less than our Master? Can we practice the radically loving forgiveness Jesus modeled for us? And can we expect it... of each other and of all who "wear" the name Christian?

Three years ago I read Dr. Fred Luskin's book *Forgive for Good* and preached a sermon about it. Dr. Luskin is the director of the Stanford University "Forgiveness Project" and I've heard him speak a couple of times. His book is wonderful, and practical, and I recommend it. What Dr. Luskin doesn't address in his book is the need for Christians to forgive because forgiveness is what Jesus has shown us, and because every week we prayerfully acknowledge that we forgive the sins of others as we ourselves are forgiven, and because Jesus has forgiven our sins. We forgive because we have been forgiven.

On the cross Jesus again showed us God's sacrificial love. In his letter to the Philippian church, Paul reminded them of God's sacrifice. He wrote, "Jesus had equal status with God but didn't think so much of Himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all... He set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, He stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, He lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death - and the worst kind of death at that - a crucifixion." Jesus lived and died to show us God's sacrificial love, and some part of forgiveness has to do with sacrifice. To sacrifice something is to surrender it. The origin of the word "sacrifice" is to "make holy." When we forgive others, as Jesus has forgiven us, we surrender all kinds of things... revenge, gossip, hurt feelings, self-righteousness, it's a long list of things we might have to surrender. And when we forgive, as Jesus forgives (Psalm 103 tells us about God's radically loving forgiveness towards us. "As far as the east is from the west, that is how far God has removed our sins from us.") When we forgive, as Jesus forgives us, we're showing Him (as if we're wearing some kind of identifying garment) to others. We're doing what He does... which is what it means to be His follower. And we are actively participating in God's Kingdom "coming on earth as it is in heaven." We are looking, as Jesus

looked past the cruelty and inhumanity of death on a cross, into eternity; we are looking at and imagining, the coming, fully realized Kingdom of God. When we forgive the sins of others, we are creating holiness.

Our theme in these forty days of Lent leading up to Easter, is from the prophet Amos, who delivered a hard message from God to the Israelites, who had turned their backs on the poor and those in need... not just in need of food and shelter but in need of mercy, and justice. The Lord said to the Israelites, "I hate, I utterly loathe your festivals; I take no pleasure in your solemn assemblies. If you offer Me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; nor will I consider the peace offerings of your cattle. Spare Me the noise of your songs! I don't want to hear the strumming of your lutes! Instead, let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

When we forgive others, we allow God's justice to roll down like water within us and around us and into the world. When we forgive the sins of others, we allow God's righteousness to flow like an ever-flowing stream in us, and around us, and into the world. We are showing who Jesus is; we are showing who we are as His followers; we are creating, as He did, holiness out of human cruelty, stupidity, and indifference. This is what Jesus expects us to do... and it's what we should expect of ourselves as His body. Because we are Christ's body, we are in this forgiveness-project together, and we can probably only do it together... confessing to each other, praying for each other, encouraging each other... and forgiving each other.

During Lent we are contributing to the waters of justice each week by writing words on strips of paper that will be added to the prayer-wall where "justice flows down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Today I invite you to write the name of someone you need to forgive, or a person or situation that needs reconciliation. At the end of worship we'll put our strips of paper on the wall, added to the other ways we're practicing justice and righteousness this Lent.

Let us pray: We come before You, Lord of Grace,
knowing that we hold onto resentment,
distancing ourselves by a wall of fear or anger.
In doing so, we cut off the lifeblood that flows between us.

Forgive us and open us to Your refreshing water of life.
When we are faced with a choice, help us choose a love
that moves us closer to compassion and courage
to speak up and stand up for what is right and good.
Lord, We lift up prayers aloud or in the silence of our hearts for
those in the church, of friends and family, of community members...
Lord, we lift up prayers for people whose names we do not know
but for whom our hearts break ...

Lord, in this silence we open ourselves to pray for all of creation, for the
things left unnamed, the hurts of which we are unaware and for the deepest
yearning of our hearts...

Silence

Everyone: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.