

"Forgiveness for Everyone?"  
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida  
4/27/03

## FORGIVENESS

How big is God's forgiveness?  
How wide are the arms of grace?

The Bible teaches us consistently that the grace and forgiveness of God are as wide as the universe. God so loved the world ... John 3:16 tells us.

And that word translated "world" is really the Greek word from which we get the word "cosmos."

The love of God is as big as all creation.

That's pretty big.  
Did you notice the last verses in our lesson for today?

"... if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world."

1 John 2:1-2

That sounds pretty universal to me. I've quoted this before, but I really like the way one of my former seminary professors, Shirley Guthrie used to put it, "God's not out to get anyone."

I often use that statement to express God's promise of forgiveness when I do a funeral because death is often a time of guilt and second guessing. "If only I had have known, I would have done this or done that.."

Dr. Guthrie's "down home" way of stating God's promise of universal forgiveness seems to cut through the fog of grief and guilt.

## WE ARE GUILTY, AND WE CAN'T HIDE

I think that at the time of death and also at many other times in our lives, we feel guilty about what we have done or have failed to do. Our feelings are normal and natural because, quite frankly, those feelings accurately reflect the truth about ourselves.

We are guilty ... of many things.  
We might be able to hide our sin from others. We may even be able to hide our sin from ourselves ... at times.

But, in the final analysis, when we try to hide our sins from God, we are just like Adam and Eve trying to hide their disobedience in the Garden of Eden. In the cool of the evening, God still comes to us and makes us take a long, hard look at where we are in life.

We can't hide from God. It just won't work.

There is no place in the universe that we can go.  
As the Psalmist put it,

"Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there....."

If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,' even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you." Psalm 139:7-12

This Psalm is about the power of God's presence. God's presence is everywhere and God's presence illuminates life.

God knows everything  
... everything about the world and everything about us.

God knows who we are in our inmost being.

WE HATE THE LIGHT

Now that statement sounds innocent enough, but the implications can change our lives forever.

If God knows everything, if "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all" (as our Scripture lesson for today puts it), then there truly is no escape when it comes to sin.

The revelation of God in Jesus Christ shines a spotlight of truth on us all.

I firmly believe that the story of Jesus would have been no different no matter when he entered the stage of history. It would have always ended in tragedy because it is the nature of human beings to hate someone who shines a spotlight on their flaws.

The life and ministry of Jesus is all about shining a spotlight on the world. Jesus was able to put saints and sinners in the same basket. Jesus deftly pointed out that the religious and political leaders were guilty of at least as many things as the so called bad people in society.

All were in need of God's redemption.  
All were in need of God's forgiveness  
... which God in Jesus Christ was quite willing to give.

But, they could not find the courage to be honest about their sin.

The religious and political leaders would rather murder the messenger than accept the fact of their own guilt.

What did they do with the one who was the light of the world?

They tried to turn out the light.  
The light was making them look too closely at their own dirty linens in public.

What did they do with the one who proclaimed that God did not come into the world to condemn the world but to save the world?

They condemned him.  
They crucified the very one who came to save them.

Jesus was murdered by people he loved.

CRUCIFYING THE REAL CHRIST

And we still crucify him you know.

Oh, not with a literal cross and nails. No, the tools of our rejection are dishonesty. We crucify Jesus on the cross of self-interest.

We turn Jesus into something that he is not to suit our own interests. We turn a righteous God into an indulgent parent.

"God loves everybody," we say. In a recent survey 95% of mainline church members said that was true. And why not?

Isn't that what John 3:16 tells us .... that God loves the world? Isn't that what the last verses of today's lesson from John's first letter tells us ... that God forgives us all through the atoning power of the cross?

You've heard it all before.  
Jesus saves.  
Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

Or as someone once put it,  
"God will forgive us.  
God's in the forgiving business."

Well, not exactly.

FREE BUT NOT CHEAP

A seminary professor once referred to this as "connect the dot" theology. It is partially true but over simplified ... and in theology the old adage certainly applies ... "sometimes a half-truth is worse than no truth at all."

There is one very important thing omitted by this way of presenting the gospel .... and that is the high cost of forgiveness. Yes, forgiveness is available to all. Forgiveness is free to those who accept it.

But, forgiveness is not cheap.  
Forgiveness comes at a high price.

Earl Palmer wrote in his commentary on this passage,  
"We learn from John by his use of one single word that forgiveness is a costly gift.

That one word is the word 'blood' .....

Jesus Christ has won for humankind the right to the way of light and life because of the event of his own lifeblood spent on our behalf. Forgiveness is not a transaction in a courtroom but the event that happens on the cross."

#### THE SPOTLIGHT OF THE CROSS

The Bible tells us that the price of forgiveness is the death of God's own Son, Jesus on the cross. That's the light or the revelation which this passage speaks about. The cross is a spotlight on the heart of humanity, and it is not a pretty picture.

But, more than just being a spotlight on the heart of humanity in general, the cross is a spotlight on our own hearts.

As I've said these past few weeks, in order to do us any good, the gospel must be taken personally. That is, we must take seriously our own guilt and sin and need for forgiveness.

We must find the courage to be honest ... honest to God.

I am reminded of the words of David in Psalm 51. In that Psalm we read,

"For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment." Psalm 51:3-4

That's the goal ... to see as clearly as David our own need for forgiveness ... to have the fact of our own sinfulness always before us and understand that we rightly deserve the judgment of God.

#### THE DANGER OF PRIDE

Now that sounds like an awfully negative way to be. Indeed, there are some critics of the church who say that this is precisely our problem. According to them, all our talk about sin and guilt leads to neurotic behavior.

But, according to this passage, those who deny the fact of their own sinfulness are the ones who are "neurotic." They are denying not only the plain facts of history but also making God out to be a liar.

We read in lesson for today, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us..... If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." 1 John 1:8,10

People sometimes ask me,  
"What is the unpardonable sin?"

I know why they ask that question. They're hopeful that they didn't commit it! I have good news on that point. Given the way that God's grace is described in such universal terms throughout the gospel, I don't think there is any sin which is unpardonable.

But, there are some sins which are particularly bad and by their nature tend to keep us from accepting God's forgiveness. And if I had to rate sins, I would rate the sin of pride right at the top of the list.

If we can't be honest with God about the sin in our life, we cut ourselves off from the possibility of forgiveness. If we believe that we're basically good people who just need to be fine tuned here and there, then the gospel makes no sense.

What good is forgiveness if we have no sense of sin and our own unworthiness? How can we talk about salvation when we believe there is nothing for us to be saved from?

#### A DAMASCUS EXPERIENCE

Remember the experience of Saul on the road to Damascus ... how he was confronted with the bright light of the risen Christ? Remember how Jesus clearly showed him his sins on that road, asking him why he persecuted his church? Do you remember how that confrontation left Saul weak and temporarily blinded?

Eventually, of course, Saul recovered his sight and became the greatest missionary the church has ever known, the apostle Paul.

Most people when they hear the story of Paul's conversion think that this is a unique experience. And, of course, in one sense that's true. Most of us are not struck by a bolt from the blue. Most of us do not hear the voice of Jesus calling us to go throughout the known world and work as a missionary.

But, on the other hand, though Paul's experience was unique, I do believe that all true conversions have something in common with Paul's conversion. The conversion experience is a moment in our life when we come face to face with who we really are and what we're really like.

The voice and presence of Christ can come to us in many ways, but the end result is the same.

We are temporarily blinded by his presence and the knowledge of our sinful disobedience.

We are forced to admit that our life is out of control and that there's nothing that we can do about it.

That's Damascus road for us.

But, just as the Damascus road experience was the beginning of a new life for Paul, so the Damascus road experience is the beginning of a new life for us. In that blinding and painful confrontation we finally are enabled to lay down our pride and pick up the freedom of God's grace in Christ Jesus.

More than that, having this encounter with the risen Christ also puts us in fellowship with others who know the same terrible truth about themselves ... and the same wonderful truth about God.

#### THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE FORGIVEN

According to our passage for today, we who have seen the light of God's presence in Jesus Christ are placed in a community of those who have also seen that light. We in the church are a community of the freed and forgiven.

In verse seven we read,

[7] but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

1 John 1:7 (NRSV)

In other words, our reason for being .... our purpose as a church .... is to be a community that mirrors the forgiveness we have received by the blood of Jesus Christ. This means that our honesty with God about our sinful and faithless ways should be mirrored in our relationship with fellow believers.

We should be honest about our faults and weaknesses with others.

Those who have met their Master on the road to Damascus, those who have been humbled by the experience of God's sheer honesty and light are in no mood to play the games that are so common in our world.

There is no place in the fellowship of brokenness for those who feel morally or religiously superior.

Instead, the fellowship of the church is a fellowship of those who accept others as they are because they themselves have been accepted as they are by the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

To put it another way, in the fellowship of believers we are loved for who we really are and not for what we do. One preacher wrote,

"It is not a religious leader or wealthy contributor or revolutionary zealot who by courage and performance has won the respect of God.

It is instead a mere person who, like all other human beings, is in need of God's life and God's light ..... The fellowship that emerges between such persons is not superficial but substantial.

We have discovered the brokenness of each other and because of the broken healer we are drawn together in a fellowship of grace. It is a fellowship created by the act of God."

How big is God's forgiveness?

As big as the world God has made.

But, just as we can only receive medicine for an illness if we recognize a problem and seek help, so only the person who knows he or she needs forgiveness can receive it. That's the key .... recognizing the need for forgiveness and salvation.

It is our job to model the way of forgiveness ... living our lives together in freedom and grace and honesty. Opening ourselves to God and to each other we enable others to be touched by the grace and forgiveness that can only be ours in Christ Jesus.

HOLY

Many people are confused about what it is like to be a Christian. They think that the longer we are Christians, the holier we become ... and the holier we feel. That's just not true.

Spiritual growth does not make us feel holy .... or righteous. On the contrary, those who are growing spiritually become more aware of their sin .... and the fact that God has forgiven their sin.

As we step more and more into God's light, the dark corners of our life are exposed.

Have you ever shined a bright light on a room that you thought was pretty clean? A shocking sight isn't it? Cobwebs in the corner, a dark spot on the rug, and dirt everywhere.

That's what happens when we become more holy. The cobwebs, spots and dirt in our lives become more apparent in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

What do we do with the mess that our life has become? We can't clean things up for ourselves. But, God can.

God can get the dark spot out of our lives.  
God can clean the dirt away.  
May God help us accept his grace.

Amen.