

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Exodus 34:1-9

1 John 1:5-2:2

A Credible Creed?: The Forgiveness of Sins

If your name happens to be Rip van Winkle, you may need to be awakened to the fact that we have a prayer of confession of sin in our bulletins each Sunday. If your name happens to be Jesus, this prayer would be only for the other people and would not apply to you. But if you don't happen to be the one who never sinned, then the prayer is intended as an expression for all of us who are here. However, why do we who with decent reason think of ourselves as among the good folks in our society need to do such a thing as confess our sin? Does such a practice not just make us feel bad about ourselves?

There are Christian traditions where preachers tend to focus on human sinfulness with loud and strident appeals about the need to repent of one's sin. I have been in some of those worship services and it felt like they believed in a God who liked to take people out to the woodshed to beat the hellishness out of them. I don't believe that is the nature of the God who is revealed in scripture and in the person of Jesus Christ.

We heard in our first reading of an encounter between God and Moses on Mount Sinai. Moses had the two tablets on which the ten commandments had been inscribed, but when he came down from the mountain, to his great dismay, he saw that the Hebrew people in their anxiety had fashioned a golden calf idol to which to pray. Moses, in a fit of temper, threw and broke the original tablets of the law. He knew God had delivered the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and then had cared for them with food and water provided even in the wilderness in which they sojourned. He knew God was justified in writing off what he understood to be a stiff-necked people. But God recognized that divine mercy was the only way forward. So when the Lord calls Moses to once again ascend Mount Sinai to receive new tablets of laws, God makes this self-disclosure: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin."

What we have is not an indulgent God, but a merciful One. Our actions matter. Certain ways of relating to God and to one another can lead to many positives and other ways can lead to great brokenness. Yet even our best efforts will be tainted by impure motives. Some of the consequences of our sin are life and death matters for ourselves or for others. While our kind of sinfulness may not take someone's life from them, it might kill the prospect of a peaceful and trusting community, which is God's good intent for us. Limits and boundaries of the Hebrew law were set for the good of the people's relationships with God and with one another. And when boundaries get crossed, we see repeatedly in scripture that God is ready to offer forgiveness as a way toward healing and restoration. We don't have to be stuck in the past by our broken ways. People are more likely to grow toward reaching their God-given potential in a spirit of grace than in a context of fear and retribution. Whether the sins we are confessing in repentance are big ones in our book or little ones by our definition, to lay our brokenness before God is an opportunity to open ourselves for God to work on us, not only taking away our sense of guilt, but reshaping us to better reflect who we are called to be as children of God. That will also necessitate that we forgive ourselves when we have done something we regret. With God's forgiveness, instead of looking back in guilt and shame, we can look forward in hope.

It is a great gift that God does relate to us in merciful and gracious ways. In this series of sermons, we have been focusing on the last part of the Apostles' Creed. Today we are exploring what it means when we say we believe in the forgiveness of sins. Please note, the creed does not say we only believe in the forgiveness of 'our' sins. After a young Caucasian man named Dylann Roof stated he wanted to start a race war and gunned down nine

members of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina at a bible study there just over a year ago, family members of those who were murdered stated their desire to forgive the man. Ethel Lance was one of those who was killed. Her daughter, Nadine Collier, addressed the accused murderer at a bail hearing, saying to him, “You took something very precious away from me. I will never talk to (my mother) ever again. I will never be able to hold her again. But I forgive you.”¹ That forgiveness offered did not undo the brokenness caused by the murderous and hateful act. But Nadine, by God’s grace, not only decided not to seek to hurt Roof and his family in response to what he had done. She was also able to unload the very heavy bitterness that she could have tried to carry. Forgiveness of others starts with refusing to seek their harm. Going beyond that, with God’s help, it can be a gift that can move toward possibilities for reconciliation and healing.

Sadly, we have seen again this week acts of violence that have ended seven lives and put further strain on race relations in this country. With disparities in how people of color have been treated by police officers in many communities, tragic police shootings can undermine what is necessary for the building of a just and peaceful community. Police recalcitrance that resists transparency and accountability does not serve the police or their communities. And of course violent attacks against police officers in retaliation for what other police officers might have done not only deprives families of their loved ones, such acts also move us further away from the goal of safe, just, and peaceful communities throughout our land. Forgiveness toward a perpetrator can be a difficult thing, but it has to start with refusing to strike back. Taking a stance of forgiveness does not mean that we cannot work for change so that sinful acts that harm might be less prevalent over time. The civil rights campaign showed that the power of peaceful demonstrations lovingly seeking what is just and fair for the whole community is the best avenue to work for that change.

The church has a role in setting an example of being people who live by grace. Our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly, our highest denominational council, meeting last month in Portland took the final action necessary to add a confessional statement to our Book of Confessions. The Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa wrote and adopted the Belhar Confession in 1986. Coming out of a historic context of racial inequality, the statement offers our denomination guidance in our role in a society stained by racism. Among its statements, it includes: “we believe that God’s lifegiving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity, that God’s lifegiving Word and Spirit will enable the church to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world.” Later in the confession, it states, “we believe that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”²

What forgiveness looks like in different situations may take various forms. But where there is brokenness, it offers the best way forward as a possibility for redemptive change in ways that make the experience of community for all possible. There is power in God’s forgiveness and in our attempts to reflect that divine grace. If someone seriously harmed or killed a member of my family, forgiveness would not just naturally flow from my heart. But I would hope that just as God has forgiven me of so much, that the Holy Spirit would empower me to forgive whoever had harmed my family, and that I would be able to say with conviction, “I believe in the forgiveness of sins.”

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/20/us/charleston-shooting-dylann-storm-roof.html?_r=0

² <https://www.pcusa.org/resource/belhar-confession/>