



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
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A Stephen Ministry Congregation
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Third Sunday of Lent

March 19, 2017

“The Hardest Thing of All”

(Romans 5:6-8)

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“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:6-8).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect of the Day: O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy, be gracious to all who have gone astray from Your ways and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Have you ever forgiven someone who hasn't repented? Have you ever forgiven such a person all the way, and by that I mean with no residual resentment or anger or bitterness?

Think of someone who hurt you deeply and wrongly. Maybe it was a surprise attack, a cutting verbal assault. It wasn't fair. It wasn't true. But it was mean.

If you're like me, you might not sleep well that night. There, in the middle of the night, you try to distract yourself with other thoughts, but the thing keeps floating to the surface, and you find yourself seething. You replay the scene over and over. You wish you would have had the presence of mind to have said in response. That would certainly have put him in his place.

Days later the edge is off. You're glad you didn't have the presence of mind to say that; it would only have made things worse. You even force yourself to pray for the guy. You decided it would be good to forgive, and you even try to forgive, but it's hard. The offending party has made no effort to apologize; there's not been a shred of sorrow.

More time passes. It's better, much better, and you might even be inclined to say it's over, it's history. But then, at the grocery store, you turn your cart down aisle 3 and there he is. You consider quietly turning around, but that would make you look like a mouse. Besides, he's seen you. You nod and say a "heh" in greeting, and he returns the Cold War salutation. You don't want to intersect paths with him in aisles 4, 6, and 9, so you casually head back to the produce department as if you've forgotten something.

Forgiveness is a messy business for you and me. We're not very good at it, actually. We try a lot of things before we try forgiveness. We try distraction. We try slandering the person with our friends. We try the passage of time, as if that heals all wounds, when any fool knows it doesn't. We try writing it off as not a big deal. We try avoidance. We try medicating ourselves from the liquor cabinet. We try to convince ourselves maybe he just had a really bad day, childhood, or marriage. We try to convince ourselves it wasn't that big of a deal. Sometimes we might even tell ourselves we were worthy of the assault; we deserved it. We try a lot of things before we try forgiveness.

Forgiveness is hard work. It's painful. It's giving up your right to strike back. And forgiveness doesn't happen all at once. If there is an opposite to the ease of flicking a light switch, it is the work of forgiveness. The ground of forgiveness is won gradually, in hard fought bits and pieces. Someone said forgiveness is sort of like losing weight. The first five/ten pounds are relatively easy. It's that last five pounds that prove really difficult. Forgiveness is a slow, messy, laborious process. It is sweat of your brow work, and if it's not by the sweat of your brow, then it's probably not forgiveness.

Think of it this way. This is your heart [large, red paper heart]. This is your heart after that surprise attack. [Crumpled up in a loose wad and torn a bit.] And this is the work of forgiveness. [Gradually unfolding it.] It may take weeks . . . months even. Again, the initial results are encouraging. It's looking better already. The trick is, don't stop [mostly unfolded, but not all the way], keep working at it. Often what happens is we get it to this point and then ease off. "Close enough" we tell ourselves. "I've forgiven him . . . the stinkin' wretch!" Obviously there's more work to do.

Don't stop. Keep moving in the right direction. Pray for him. (It's hard to hate someone you're praying for.) Reach out to him. Find a time to communicate with him in person about what he did that was wrong and how it made you feel. Address it head on. Give him a chance to

contribute to the work of forgiveness and reconciliation. But even if he refuses to meet with you, try to see him as God sees him: created by God, counted worthy of Jesus' death. See him as capable of good.

Now, maybe you're better at getting wrinkles out of paper than I am. Maybe you're better at forgiving all the way than I am. (I'm still learning. I'm hoping we can get better at it as we age.) In the end, however, no matter how hard we work at it, I don't believe our forgiveness can ever be perfect forgiveness. For all our efforts, there will still be wrinkles and tears. There will still be a little resentment, and guardedness. These things don't disappear altogether. Ours is not perfect forgiveness, but at least we can do it here, literally to this altar, and pray God would forgive him perfectly. [Set the heart on the altar.] Forgiveness is hard work, but if you need a little motivation, just have another look at our Gospel lesson.

You know the story. A man, a servant, has just been forgiven an impossibly large debt. Therefore, that servant should have found it good, right and easy to forgive his fellow servant of the small debt he owed. Instead, he grabs the guy by the neck and starts choking him, demanding payment (Mt. 18:21ff). This is not an attractive fellow. You know what happens. That servant's refusal to have mercy is exposed and he is promptly thrown into jail, but not just for imprisonment. It's for torture the text says. And the idea is if God can forgive us this whopping load of debt, we can forgive one another of much smaller debts. But it's hard. Human nature is to fixate on the speck of sawdust in our neighbor's eye, while ignoring the plank in our own (Mt. 7:3).

So I don't want God to forgive me like I forgive others. I don't want there to be leftover wrinkles on God's heart that I've caused, because if God can't forgive me all the way, then I'm all the way lost. There's no getting into heaven 90% forgiven, 90% righteous and the rest still rebellious sinner. We need better from God than we are able to give one another. And God delivers!

Isaiah 1, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.” Not the dirty stuff in the corner of Walmart’s parking lot. No, the stuff that is blinding white.

The Baptizer pointed at Jesus and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” Where does he take it? Don’t know. “Away” is the important word there. Psalm 103 assures us he takes it far away, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us” (vv.10-11). That means we don’t have to worry about those sins coming back to haunt us.

Psalm 130, “If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness.” (No wrinkles or marks or any other record of our sins on God’s heart.)

Jer. 31, “I will forgive [your] wickedness and will remember [your] sins no more” (v. 34). Our omniscient Father chooses amnesia. And just in case we missed it, 1 Jn. 1 says, “The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin” (v. 7).

God delivers what we need the most. And he doesn’t wait for us to take the initiative, or for us first to repent. Have you noticed how Jesus sometimes startled people with his forgiveness? Remember that paralytic man who was dropped down through the roof by his friends? First thing Jesus says to him is, “Take heart, son, your sins are forgiven.” I suspect the guy was hoping to hear something else, something like “pick up your mat and walk.” That would come in a few minutes. First there was a more important matter to attend to. “Take heart, son, your sins are forgiven.” It’s more important because when we have forgiveness, we have everything. Where there is forgiveness of sins, there is life and salvation.

After Jesus died on the cross, to the disciples who had abandoned him, first thing he says is not a cool and measured, “heh” but rather a merciful, “Peace be with you!” Nobody asked him for it. Nor did they have opportunity to beg him for it. He takes the initiative and gives them what they need the most: “Peace be with you.” Also for you and

me, God's word of mercy is the first word in the Divine-human conversation.

We talk of preemptive military strikes, to get the terrorists before they get us. This seems to be a preemptive forgiveness, preemptive grace, to get to the sin before it gets us! And I think that is at the heart of our text. "Christ died for the ungodly" Paul writes. "God shows his love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Preemptive grace! Preemptive mercy! Preemptive forgiveness.

We see this in Holy Baptism. The baby doesn't come to the font all little white and innocent on the inside. No, there's a load of primeval muck there already, and much more state-of-the-art filth is on the way. It's just around the corner. Yet there's no point in delaying his grace and mercy, and so just days into the baby's life, the Spirit begins with the first washing of regeneration. Yes, you bear the wrinkles on your heart, but more importantly, because of Holy Baptism you bear the sign of the cross on your heart which marks you as redeemed by Christ. That cross supersedes any other mark or scar.

We're already deep into Lent, half way there now, and as we draw closer to it, the cross appears larger and larger. When they nailed Jesus to the cross and left him hanging there, bleeding, dying, watching as his friends ran, and as the authorities mocked, and as the passersby taunted, and as soldiers threw dice . . . looking at all that, all that injustice and cruelty, all that ungrace . . . looking at all that, he does not say, "You're going to burn for this." He does not curse them. He does not even rebuke them. Those who were there, those who were listening carefully, those who were closest to him heard him say the hardest thing of all: "Father, forgive them." And so a number of years later, Paul wrote, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

I invite you then, as sinners, as those who know how to forgive only imperfectly, I invite you to come to the Lord's altar for His perfect forgiveness. Come at his invitation and drink deeply from his amazing grace, the

blood of his Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, shed for the forgiveness of all your sins. And I invite you to share that forgiveness, this peace as best you can with others who need it just as much. Amen.

