



3rd Sunday after Pentecost: “Will you forgive me?”

June 13, 2010

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Amen.

Barely twenty-four hours after being ordained, I received a phone call from my sister. Thinking she had messed up tentative plans for after the service, she explained a series of events I had not been aware of. As she finished her explanation, she ended with the words, “I’m sorry, will you forgive me?”

Her question took me aback. “Will you forgive me?” Had she not heard Bishop Hoover’s scriptural admonition to both Pastor Mahady and myself that if we forgave the sins of any, they would be forgiven, and if we retained the sins of any, they would be retained? (John 20:21-23).

My question back to her on various levels, was how could I not? After all, the series of events were understandable. They were events that could have happened to anyone. They were minor, things I had not given much thought to. The events were also things that if I could not, did not, or would not, that they would be the very same sins of mine that could not, would not be forgiven. Not to mention the reality it would not be a good beginning to ministry if I could not or would not forgive my sister!

“Will you forgive me?” Both the asking – and the answering of this question can be extremely difficult. Asking this question means admitting to having done something wrong. Whatever this something is, it is something that weighs heavy on our hearts, on our consciences, and has the potential to keep us up at night with fear, grief, heartache, and worry.

Likewise, to answer this question can be equally as difficult. To answer “no” means we have been wronged and hurt so deep that we are not ready to extend forgiveness to the one who has hurt us. We might not be ready to let go of a grudge – the very same grudge that enables us to remain in bondage to sin to the point where we cannot free ourselves.

On the other hand, to answer “yes” when we are not ready, can leave us giving a flip answer. Saying “yes” when we are not ready can leave the impression we are not taking seriously the request asked of us. There are times, where we are ready to seek healing and wholeness. In being ready, we wholeheartedly and sincerely are willing to ask and seek forgiveness and reconciliation.

The first thing that has to happen in seeking forgiveness is to recognize that we have sinned.

Who us?? We might think to ourselves. We would never do something like that. Not me.

But sin we do, and as Luther states, ‘boldly’ at that. Our confession of sins reminds us, ‘we have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. . . .’

As humans, we do not like to admit we are wrong. One does not have to look too far into the news to see how widespread this is. Nor do we like it when someone points out to us our mistakes, our flaws, the things we think no one else can see. Yet in admitting we are wrong, and that we have sinned, we sometimes need someone to show us the error of our ways.

Enter the prophet, a messenger of and from God. In Bible times, the prophet not only proclaimed a future filled with hope and new things, but was also frequently called upon by God to share a word of discipline and reprimand. These words of discipline were to both nations that had strayed far from God’s commands, and to individuals who thought they were above reproach.

This was Nathan’s task, his challenge du’jour, if you will. In a summons from the Lord, Nathan is sent to David. Earlier in this chapter of Second Samuel, David’s actions focus on two verbs. David “sent” in order that he could “take”. Now it is the Lord, who sends in order to speak. The Lord is angry that David, his chosen, the very one the Lord had anointed, called, and deemed worthy of being king and leading the Lord’s people has now overstepped his bounds. The Lord wants David to know that enough is enough as well as his displeasure.

The Lord had every reason to be angry and displeased with David. David let personal desires get in the way of his keeping of Torah, the law. In letting these desires get in the way, David broke several commandments in order to get what he wanted instead of what the Lord intended for him. David desired another man’s wife. He slept with her, and she became pregnant. David probably was not counting on this to happen, but when it did, he thought of a plan to cover this up. He sent for Uriah to return from battle and to spend time with his wife.

Uriah returned home as requested, but he did not return to his house. Instead, he stayed at the entrance of the king’s house with the servants, mindful of the promise he had made of being faithful in service. When David sees his plan to have Uriah help cover his actions is not going to work as David intended, he decides to have Uriah killed in battle.

Not thinking consequences but following his desires, David breaks at least three of the commandments. He committed adultery. He lied, or gave a false witness to the leader of Uriah’s unit. He wanted – and took some one that was not his to take in the first place!

It is these violations which Nathan must speak to David about. Nathan must do so in such a way that Nathan does not lose either his position as prophet, or his life.

But notice David's response after being confronted by Nathan. David does not hide behind his kingly power and say, "it was not me." Nor, does he respond with a Steve Urkel question from the 1980's television show "Family Matters", "Did I do that?" Nor does he blame Bathsheba for her actions. Rather, David recognizes the error of his ways, that he has done wrong, and he repents.

"Repent" in Hebrew is related to a word meaning "to turn". Repent is to turn and go in a new direction. It is a direction that moves us closer to God and away from that which keeps us in sin. It is a movement away from brokenness and closer to wholeness and peace – the path that God intends for us.

This repentance, this turning to God is individual and corporate. It is an action, an event, even a process that requires – and demands a response from all of us. It means you holding me accountable, just as much as it means me holding you accountable. Which is why, when we began our worship this morning, we began with the confession of sins and forgiveness from the night time service of prayer in the Lutheran Book of Worship. The reality is, those very same words of forgiveness that I say to you weekly, are also the very same words I need to hear also: that God who is rich in mercy, forgives our sins, and cleanses us from all unrighteousness.

Thankfully, because of God's rich grace and mercy, God forgives more than the little we confess. Two realities exist within this. First, it is as the hymn proclaims, "There's a wideness in God's mercy." Second, righteousness and sin exist side by side in the community, both in the Bible, and here in this place. While some may wrestle with whether or not their sins have been forgiven, others live in the assurance, confidence, freedom, hope, joy, and love that comes in experiencing God's grace, and having our lives touched by God.

The woman in our Gospel reading today knew this. This knowledge spilled from her heart, and into her life. She lived it – and she let everyone know she was living in this new freedom – even when others did not approve. Her joy in having new life, of having her sins forgiven was obvious.

The woman's joy in having her sins forgiven was misunderstood. The Pharisee who had invited Jesus to dinner could not see the forgiveness, or even why Jesus had forgiven her sins in the first place. The Pharisee began to question perhaps Jesus was not as much of a prophet as he thought. If Jesus was truly a prophet, the Pharisee thought, then he would know 'what type of woman' was in his presence: someone who was a sinner.

The Pharisee saw – and judged what he deemed to be a sin. Jesus, saw not only the sinner, but also the saint inside, waiting to break forth in new life.

May God, who is rich in mercy continue to grant us the humility to admit when we are wrong, the courage to confess our sins, and the boldness to forgive as we have first been forgiven, now and always. Amen.