

Journey to the Cross - Ash Wednesday Sunday – Week 1

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - March 1, 2020

Would you pray with me a prayer of confession before our sermon today?

O God, I confess to you the nature
I was born with which causes me to sin.
I confess to you the things I do over
and over, even when I don't want to do them.
And when you have finished forgiving
me for those things, Lord you are not done
for I have more.
I confess to you the sin in my life
that causes others to sin as well.
I confess to you the sin I put behind me—
for a time—only to let it take
control of my life again.
And when you have finished forgiving
me for those things, Lord
you are not done for I have more.
I confess now, those sins I'm in denial about
For you know me better than I know myself.
Help me to live the righteous way, because of your grace.

The good news is—**“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”** (1 John 1:9)

This past Wednesday was Ash Wednesday. We had a really enjoyable dinner service together. Thank you to those who brought the wonderful soups. Thank you to those who brought the bread and butter, and set up and cleaned up. It was a really wonderful time together to reflect on the beginning of Lent.

Ash Wednesday is a day of repentance marking the beginning of Lent. It is a time we set aside to reflect on our life in Jesus. We recognize God's greatness and love, and reaffirm our reliance on Him. We entrust our present circumstances and our future hopes to Him as we look to Easter. During Lent our attention changes from sin to our loving God.

I like how Henri Nouwen describes Lent in his book *Show Me the Way*. If you're not sure what to make of Lent, this explains it, but it's a lengthy quote.

"God's mercy is greater than our sins. There is an awareness of sin that does not lead to God but [leads] to self-preoccupation. Our temptation is to be so impressed by our sins and failures and so overwhelmed by our lack of generosity that we get stuck in a paralyzing guilt. It is the guilt that says: 'I am too sinful to deserve God's mercy.' It is the guilt that leads to introspection instead of directing our eyes to God. It is the guilt that has become an idol and therefore a form of pride.

Lent is the time to break down this idol and to direct our attention to our loving Lord. The question is: 'Are we like Judas, who was so overcome by his sin that he could not believe in God's mercy any longer and hanged himself, or are we like Peter who returned to his Lord with repentance and cried bitterly for his sins?' The season of Lent, during which winter and spring struggle with each other for dominance, helps us in a special way to cry out for God's mercy."

Lent helps us cry out for God's mercy and this was common in the prayers of the Bible. In Psalm 51 King David confesses his sins and asks for God to make him clean.

Psalm 51 - 1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.

2 Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

But then we don't stay at Ash Wednesday, this morning I want us to look beyond sin to justification. There's a \$3 theological phrase Presbyterians sometimes say, "*Justification by faith*". "*Justification by faith*" is where the rubber meets the road of sin and forgiveness. It has to do with our reputations and our character being justified. It's that we're not being marked as sinners any longer, because we've been made righteous by faith in Jesus. It's just as if we've never sinned.

Justification goes beyond forgiveness. It's being given the status of a righteous person by faith in Jesus. We've received a mercy we may never fully understand this side of heaven. We may never understand it, partly because it's hard to understand how much it cost. Though we begin to, when we follow our Heavenly Father's lead and choose to forgive others. And that leads me to a question, how do we forgive when the offense may still hurt so bad?

Sometimes I hear people tell me a story of someone who wronged them and it might have been many years ago, but the pain still sounds so fresh. Maybe you now know of someone you feel you just can't forgive. They did something or changed something in your life that you have never gotten over. This morning, I don't want to leave you there, I want you to know that forgiving them is possible. How? Because of God's presence in your life.

This morning, I want us to consider our personal relationship with God and how that can help us forgive others. I think we can divide people in the world in two ways. Those whose sins we want to forgive and those we don't. Surprising, right? To not want someone forgiven. I mean, we all want God to forgive us, we want others to forgive us, but maybe while we want that mercy, we only want justice for others. *"Mercy for me; justice for those who've wronged me."*

Forgiveness is problematic, when it means forgiving someone for the wrong they've done to us or to those we

love. Because Christians believe all sins can be forgiven, it's challenging when apparently bad people are given forgiveness. Everyone once in a while there is an army officer from Nazi Germany found living somewhere in the world with a new life and new name. They've never been convicted in court, so they've been living for years like an innocent person. What do we do with that?

What do we do when sinners come back to haunt us? We can wait for a law court to convict them and require a penalty be served to justify them. Or sometimes, we have to forgive them without that. We forgive, so that we can be free. And that's really hard to do sometimes.

How do we do that? Why should we do that? Because we too needed forgiveness, when our Heavenly Father reached out with mercy, forgiveness and love. See our Heavenly Father doesn't hold grudges. Imagine if God held grudges against us. Wow, we'd be in for it big time. What year in world history would God have said, "*That's enough!*" and wiped us all out? Psalm 130:3-4 says, **If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness...**

What can we then do in our hearts, with our words and our actions, when we're confronted with people we just don't want to forgive? When we can't stand the thought of them getting off guiltless and we want them to pay. Maybe we've already tried to make them pay with our anger and hurtful words, or by wanting them out of our life.

What can we do when we encounter at Easter the Biblical truth that God can and will, not only forgive anyone, but justify them through faith in Jesus and make it just as if they never sinned? Well, no one can just forgive without bearing the cost. If we look at the cross, we see the cost of forgiveness. I've heard it said, forgiveness is *"bearing the cost instead of making the wrongdoer [bear] it..."* *"It's reaching out in love to seek your enemy's renewal and change."*

I believe God wants restore lives, including the lives of those who have wronged you. That's why God absorbed the cost of sin Himself at the Cross. He bore the cost, so we can forgive. He's saying, *"Hey, hey, I already paid that debt. That grudge you bear isn't making amens, it's making things worse."*

If you recount the history of any two people groups in history who are holding a grudge against each other, I bet you'll find 100% of the time that there were offenses done on both sides, by both people groups. So to make amens, it's not about one side confessing and asking forgiveness, it's both sides doing that where amens need to be made. There can't be peace without forgiveness on both sides.

The genius of the Cross is that there's forgiveness for all. There's total forgiveness, because of the Cross, so we don't need to live like we're the only one who gets to hold a grudge. So how do we forgive when if it's so painful and we want justice? I know I spoke on this last week, but as

we approach Easter, it's all about forgiveness. So how do we forgive?

1. We remember the sacrifice Jesus made for us and for them. He wants to save them too. We and them need a Savior, we're both in the same sinking boat needing to be saved. The Bible says, "**While we were still sinners, Christ died for us...**" (Romans 5:8). This is similar to the pity we talked about last week. When we have pity on them we find a commonality, that we too need forgiveness.

2. We tell God how it feels to forgive or even how painful it is maybe to even think about forgiving. Last week I talked about paying down the emotional debt ourselves, not making the other person pay. Well, now I'll be clear, there's no denial of the pain, the wrong they've done, and that they deserve justice when we forgive. Their action was sinful.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "*Everyone who forgives bears the other's sins.*" He said, "*On the Cross we see God doing visibly and cosmically what every human being must do to forgive someone, though on an infinitely greater scale.*" (*Cost of Discipleship*, p. 199). God knows what it is like to forgive, so He can handle hearing what it is like for you to forgive.

3. Then go a bit further with your honesty. If it was so bad what they did to you or to someone you love, tell God what

you would like done to them. Don't be afraid, God already knows what's in your heart.

Tell God what you really think. Get it out. Tell God what you think about all this business of forgiving the sins of the world and what you think of Easter if it means you have to forgive too. Yell, as respectfully as you can, to God about how they don't deserve a bit of mercy for what they've done. No forgiveness, no grace, no justification, no reinstatement and how they don't deserve one bit of it. And that leads to number 4...

4. Tell God and then let God be God. And what does that do? It puts the responsibility for justice on God, where the responsibility for justifying them has always been. And it lets you be free.

On Ash Wednesday, we confessed our sins, knowing God is faithful to forgive. On every day after, we grow as people of hope, because of our loving God. Receiving God's forgiveness and giving it to others is then about taking good care of our souls, sinking our roots deeply into God's love, receiving new life and showing new fruit on the outside. We don't fix our attention on sin, but on our loving Father. Then we will grow as people filled with hope and helping others find hope again.