

9/27/26

Forgiveness

Psalm 32

My message today is about forgiveness.

Now, please, before you check out, thinking this is going to be another one of Pastor Bill's snoozers, consider this for a moment:

Forgiveness is to Christianity as the golf ball is to the game of golf or gasoline is to the internal combustion engine. Without them, you're not getting out of the starter's gate.

A round of golf isn't going to happen without a golf ball. In my case, I'll need a sleeve of them, a long sleeve like the length of one of my dress shirts.

And my little jalopy? It isn't going to transport me to the golf course if I have no petrol.

The same is true for the relationship between forgiveness and Christianity. Christianity just won't work and doesn't work without forgiveness.

I bring up the topic of forgiveness today simply because it's addressed in our Psalm.

David begins Psalm 32 writing, *"Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him."*

And in verse 5, *"I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord' – and you forgave the guilt of my sin."*

Do you know how it is when some things are so common in life that we almost forget they are there? Take air or water or electricity for example. Life works when these elements are so readily available.

We crash on our bed at night, wrapping ourselves up in blankets, so thankful for our mattress, but we never wonder whether or not we'll have enough air to breathe while we're comatose for the next 8 hours.

The same is true for water. As Michiganders, we're blessed with being surrounded by fresh water, and when we go to the sink and turn of the faucet, we rarely ever ask ... "I wonder if I'll get water today?" It's so common, so accessible, so readily available. And because it is, we rarely give it another thought.

Could it be that this is how we view forgiveness?

Forgiveness, so readily available to us that we don't give it another thought?

And since we don't think about it, could we forget about it? I dare say yes.

Worse yet, could we lose our understanding of its value?

Maybe we think that forgiveness is so commonplace, like leaves on a tree, that we can afford to withhold it from others, thinking to ourselves, at least on a subconscious level, oh, God will forgive them, so I don't have to.

Sort of like, if you don't like Walmart, you can go down the road to Kroger's to buy your groceries.

But the truth is, we are the only source of forgiveness a person has because we're the ones they sinned against, and it's our forgiveness they need, not our neighbors.

Sometimes we may actually use our reluctance to forgive or our non-forgiveness as leverage against another. Have you ever said to yourself, "I'll forgive him when I'm convinced he's truly sorry for what he's done to me." Can this even be classified as forgiveness?

Did the father of the prodigal son forgive the son only after he confessed his sin?

Of course not! In his heart, the Father had already forgiven his son long before he had ever come to his senses and started his journey home. We know this because the Father was already searching for his son nearly the very moment he left home.

So, I guess what I'm trying to point out this morning is that I never want us to forget or fail to realize, as Christians, how incredibly good we've got it because of God's willingness and desire and power to forgive us. As David proclaims, *"Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered."*

We're all blessed today because God stands ready and able to forgive our sins. Recall 1 John 1:9: *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."*

When we think about it, forgiveness is a dominant and repetitive theme throughout the Bible. It can even be inferred in the conversation that occurred among the Trinity before creation. The sentence *"Let us make man in our image"* presupposes forgiveness in at least two ways:

First, it reminds us that forgiveness is fundamentally relational. It requires at least two people: The offender and the one who has been offended or as they use to say back in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and earlier, the sinner and the victim.

Now, I'm not saying God sinned. I'm only making the point that the triune God, in his very nature is relational because he is three – in -one, Father, Son and Holy Spirit and since we are made in God's image, we too are made to be relational, and by consequence have the capacity to forgive as God does, not in the completeness or fullness that God does,

but we do, at a least on a creaturely level, have the ability to forgive one another.

That's why when our Lord taught the disciples to pray, he included, *"forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us."*

Secondly, God's act of creating humans infers forgiveness because he gave us free will, the freedom to chose between right and wrong, good and evil. So, God, knew from the very beginning that forgiveness would have to be essential to bring about man's restoration and salvation.

And so, we get a clear glimpse of God's forgiveness towards mankind early on when we read in Genesis 3 that after cursing the serpent and the ground, and announcing the consequences of Adam's sin, *"the Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and Eve and clothed them."*

And this is really what forgiveness is all about: Covering one's sin.

The one who is offended, the one who is sinned against willingly bears the burden of the sin and pays the cost of the sin themselves so that the relationship between the two parties can be restored and find harmony.

God paid the price in that he used part of his own creation and spilled its blood to provide animal skins to cover Adam and Eve's shame due to their sin.

And it wasn't that Adam and Eve's nakedness was necessarily shameful, causing God to make coverings for them. Rather, It was because their bodies were no longer covered by God's glory which is the best covering ever.

In a very real sense, God's glory could no longer rest on Adam and Eve because of their sin, and so a temporary alternative would have to suffice until a day when all believers will be clothed in God's righteousness.

Isaiah writes in chapter 61:10, *"I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness."*

Isaiah can write this about God and his forgiveness toward mankind because God gave Isaiah a vision for what the year of the Lord's favor looks like. The burden of humanity's sin was to be carried and paid in full by the Messiah himself so that our relationship with him and can be restored for all eternity.

Of the Messiah Isaiah writes in 53: 4 – 5: *"Surely, he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."*

And so, God's offer of forgiveness becomes our greatest blessing – if we choose to appropriate it – because when we do, we can have a wonderful, personal and loving relationship with our Creator forever and ever. Sounds good, doesn't it?

When I think of God forgiving us through his Son Jesus, I'm reminded of this short story. I'm sure I've read it to you before, especially around Easter time. But it's definitely worth repeating.

I saw a strange sight. I stumbled upon a story most strange, like nothing in my life, my street sense, my sly tongue had ever prepared me for. Hush, child. hush now, and I will tell it to you.

Even before the dawn one Friday morning I noticed a young man, handsome and strong, walking the alleys of our City. He was pulling an old cart filled with clothes both bright and new, and he was calling in a clear tenor voice: 'Rags!'

Ah, the air was foul and the first light filthy to be crossed by such sweet music.

'Rags! New rags for old! I take your tired rags! Rags!'

'Now this is a wonder,' I thought to myself, for the man stood six-feet-four, and his arms were like tree limbs, hard and muscular, and his eyes flashed intelligence.

Could he find no better job than this, to be a ragman in the inner city?

I followed him. My curiosity drove me. And I wasn't disappointed.

Soon the ragman saw a woman sitting on her back porch. She was sobbing into a handkerchief, sighing, and shedding a thousand tears. Her knees and elbows made a sad X. Her shoulders shook. Her heart was breaking.

The Ragman stopped his cart. Quietly, he walked to the woman, stepping round tin cans, dead toys, and Pampers.

'Give me your rag,' he said gently. 'and I'll give you another.'

He slipped the handkerchief from her eyes. She looked up, and he laid across her palm a linen cloth so clean and new that it shined. She blinked from the gift to the giver.

Then, as he began to pull his cart again, the Ragman did a strange thing: he put her stained handkerchief to his own face; and then he began to weep, to sob as grievously as she had done, his shoulders shaking. Yet she was left without a tear.

'This is a wonder,' I breathed to myself, and I followed the sobbing Ragman like a child who cannot turn away from mystery.

'Rags! Rags! New Rags for old!'

In a little while, when the sky showed grey behind the rooftops and I could see the shredded curtains hanging out black windows, the Ragman came upon a girl whose head was wrapped in a bandage, whose eyes were empty. Blood soaked her bandage. A single line of blood ran down her cheek.

Now the tall Ragman looked upon this child with pity, and he drew a lovely yellow bonnet from his cart.

'Give me your rag,' he said, tracing his own line on her cheek, 'and I'll give you mine.'

The child could only gaze at him while he loosened the bandage, removed it, and tied it to his own head. The bonnet he set on hers. And I gasped at what I saw: for with the bandage went the wound! Against his brow it ran a darker, more substantial blood -- his own!

'Rags! Rags! I take old rags!' cried the sobbing, bleeding, strong, intelligent Ragman.

The sun hurt both the sky, now, and my eyes; the Ragman seemed more and more to hurry.

'Are you going to work?' he asked a man who leaned against a telephone pole. The man shook his head.

The Ragman pressed him: 'Do you have a job?'

'Are you crazy?' sneered the other. He pulled away from the pole, revealing the right sleeve of his jacket -- flat, the cuff stuffed into the pocket. He had no arm.

'So,' said the Ragman. 'Give me your jacket, and I'll give you mine.'

So much quiet authority in his voice!

The one-armed man took off his jacket. So did the Ragman -- and I trembled at what I saw: for the Ragman's arm stayed in its sleeve, and when the other put it on, he had two good arms, thick as tree limbs; but the Ragman had only one.

'Go to work,' he said.

After that he found a drunk, lying unconscious beneath an army blanket, an old man, hunched, wizened, and sick. He took that blanket and wrapped it round himself, but for the drunk he left new clothes.

And now I had to run to keep up with the Ragman. Though he was weeping uncontrollably, and bleeding freely at the forehead, pulling his cart with one arm, stumbling for drunkenness, falling again and again, exhausted, old, old, and sick, yet he went with terrible speed. On spider's legs he skittered through the alleys of the City, this mile and the next, until he came to its limits, and then he rushed beyond.

I wept to see the change in this man. I hurt to see his sorrow. And yet I need to see where he was going in such haste, perhaps to know what drove him so.

The little old Ragman -- he came to a landfill. He came to the garbage pits. And I wanted to help him in what he did, but I hung back, hiding.

He climbed a hill. With tormented labor he cleared a little space on that hill. Then he signed. He lay down. He pillowed his head on a handkerchief and a jacket. He covered his bones with an army blanket.

And he died.

Oh, how I cried to witness that death! I slumped in a junked car and wailed and mourned as one who has no hope -- because I had come to love the Ragman. Every other face had faded in the wonder of this man, and I cherished him; but he died.

I sobbed myself to sleep.

I did not know -- how could I know? -- that I slept through Friday night and Saturday and its night too.

But then, on Sunday morning, I was wakened by a violence.

Light -- pure, hard, demanding light -- slammed against my sour face, and I blinked, and I looked, and I saw the first wonder of all.

There was the Ragman, folding the blanket most carefully, a scar on his forehead, but alive! And, besides that, healthy!

There was no sign of sorrow or age, and all the rags that he had gathered shined for cleanliness.

Well, then I lowered my head and, trembling for all that I had seen, I myself walked up to the Ragman.

I told him my name with shame, for I was a sorry figure next to him.

Then I took off all my clothes in that place, and I said to him with dear yearning in my voice: 'Dress me.'

He dressed me.

My Lord, he put new rags on me, and I am a wonder beside him.

The Ragman, the Ragman, the Christ!

Psalm 30:11 - 12

"You turned my wailing into dancing. You removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever."

Amen.