

For a while about five years into my ministry, my Mother and I had a running joke. Or let me say ‘she had the joke, and I would run with it!’

I would call her and she would ask if I had a good sermon that Sunday morning.

“Yes, Momma, I think it was.”

“Was it about sin?”

“Well, it touched on it.”

“Were you against it?”

So let me say up front, this sermon touches on sin, and I am against it; and Lent is an opportunity for healthy repentance of our sin.

But I don’t believe Lent is a time for being miserable, rather it is a time to ponder the depth of God’s love.

So I pray we will prepare ourselves during Lent for a journey of the heart and open ourselves to these psalms that celebrate God’s presence, God’s steadfast love, God’s passions.

And this is where I’m going to touch on sin.

The Russian Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann wrote that “Lent is the liberation of our enslavement to sin, from the prison of ‘this world.’”

He says, “...The triumph of sin, the main sign of its rule over the world, is division, opposition, separation, hatred. Therefore, the first break through this fortress of sin is forgiveness: the return to unity, solidarity, love.”

Forgiveness and reconciliation are two issues that we encounter throughout the Bible. Whether we like to admit it or not, God does not allow us to avoid or escape the notion that humans need forgiveness.

No matter who we think we are, how religious we think we are, what religion we profess, or

even if we distance ourselves from religion in its many forms, a fundamental premise of

Christianity is that there is something about our humanity that is flawed.

Yet the Bible does not merely define our predicament. Instead, we find there that God has refused to leave us outside his love.

God loves us, with all our sinfulness. God loves us, despite the fact that we create hellish situations for ourselves, for others, and in the creation.

God loves us, as strange as it may seem to us and as hard as we may find it to accept, because God chooses to love us. God loves us because God loves us.

So God provides a way to restore the relationship we ruined. This way, made personal in Jesus Christ, we know by the word "forgiveness."

So the Bible is essentially about forgiveness.

Whether you are reading in the Prophets, the Psalms, the law in the Old Testament or in the Gospels, on the lips of Christ or in the Letters of Paul from the New Testament, the word about forgiveness is constantly there.

For Jesus, it is not only a lesson to teach but a life lived as he hangs on the cross. Among his last words were, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.”

It is a part and parcel of our very relationship in Christ. How would we have a relationship with Christ if it were not for God’s forgiveness of us?

The passages we have read today in Jeremiah and Psalm 32 challenge us to ponder the magnificent implication God’s passion for forgiveness.

If anything, this psalm is a beatitude of a forgiven sinner.

Athanasius, a powerful figure in the early years of the Christian church, wrote: “Most scripture speaks to us, while the Psalms speak for us.”

So our psalmist speaks for us: *“Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.”*

Eugene Peterson in “The Message” describes forgiveness in this psalm as a “fresh start, your slate’s wiped clean.”

It’s when we find ourselves living under the heavy weight of guilt because of decisions we have made which hurt those we love most; and most of all, God.

So we cry out to God for forgiveness and another chance.

The Psalmist cried out to God because he needed forgiveness. No one pushed him into this pit of misery; he tripped over his own sins.

Can you relate to the psalmist this morning?

- Are you struggling with pretending you have it all together when it’s really all falling apart?
- Do you feel like you are sinking into a hole from which there is no return?
- Did you get there because of choices you made which hurt those closest to you?

What do you want to say to God today?

- Forgive me. Give me another chance.
- Help me be honest about what I have done and take responsibility for it.
- Lead me to people who can help me change my behavior.
- Show me how to make amends and repair fractured relationships.
- Restore my self-esteem and desire to live.
- Create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me.

What do you think God wants to say to you?

- I have heard your plea for help.
- I still love you and will give you another chance.
- Take my hand and let me walk with you out of this hole, one step at a time.

Forgiveness is about healing. It is a gift of God for us, but we have to receive it.

The willingness to receive forgiveness poses a special challenge. Just as we sometimes take back our forgiveness of another person, we frequently take our sins back from God’s forgiveness.

The late Douglas Steere wrote about this perverse dynamic of human pride and control. He said:

*There is...a condition for receiving God’s gift of forgiveness. [We] must be willing to accept it. Absurd as this may seem, there are few who will believe in and accept the*

*forgiveness of God so completely as to...leave their sin with [God] forever.*

*And he concludes: [We] are always re-opening the vault where [we] have deposited [our] sin...forever asking to have it back in order to fondle it, to reconstruct query, to worry over it...Thus [our] sin ties [us] to the past.*

The point is that once we have come into God's love, once we have chosen to receive God's love, to accept God's forgiveness, we have entered into a world where we can't stop loving.

Once we have chosen to love, we can't stop forgiving. To demand that someone crawl back to us through the needle's eye of our demand or else they don't deserve it and we won't give it to them is to fail to understand the gospel at all.

The consummation of this message from Jeremiah – that we know God, that God “forgives our iniquity and remembers our sin no more” – is revealed to us in Jesus Christ: his life, his death, his resurrection.

Jesus is God's personal assurance that we are forgiven, the new covenant poured out for us.

And because we have been forgiven, we are free to love people shunned by others, embrace people who others declare untouchable, and celebrate reconciliation because this is God's desire for us, for the creation, and forever.

If we have accepted God's forgiveness, let us celebrate the invitation that God extends by following Jesus in loving as God loves, living as God loves, forgiving as God loves.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.