

Forgiven
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Psalm 32

- ¹ Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
- ² Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.
- ³ While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
- ⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.
- ⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord',
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.
- ⁶ Therefore let all who are faithful
offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.
- ⁷ You are a hiding-place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.
- ⁸ I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
- ⁹ Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.
- ¹⁰ Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.
- ¹¹ Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

¹ Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ So he told them this parable:

¹¹ “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.” So he divided his property between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to himself he said, “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ ” ²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” ²² But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.” ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” ³¹ Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” ’

I wonder if the persons who first gathered before a group of people to say these next words wondered themselves if they would be finished as soon as they began: “You are forgiven.” The logical steps of our faith are to realize, and confess, that we have turned away

from God, to receive God's forgiveness, and to go out into the world together to serve God and God's children out of gratitude for the loving forgiveness so generously given. End of story. You know you're forgiven so now it's up to you to take it from here, take it beyond these walls.

As you know, that isn't how it seems to work. We all hear every week that we are forgiven; we even call it an assurance. We are called to confess with words of comfort which remind us that we are assured of a forgiveness already given. We confess together and then, silently, we offer our own personal confessions. Then: "Know we are forgiven and be at peace." We trust in God and trust what Jesus has taught us. But deep, very, very deep in our hearts, we wonder, "Really? For **everything**? Do you **really** forgive me for those things for which I cannot forgive myself? Maybe the things for which others cannot forgive me? And yet you, God, forgive me?"

If we hear it but can't fully believe in it, then we can't fully go out into the world together to serve God and God's children out of gratitude for the loving forgiveness so generously given. Like people who check and double-check and triple-check a winning lottery ticket, we have a hard time believing it's true. Like people who wake up to a partner and suddenly remember that person knows them **and** loves them still, we have a hard time believing it's true. I would guess like a son who told his father he'd rather that the father were dead so he could have the money coming to him, then had to return in humiliation after squandering it all, only to find his father running joyously toward him, we have a hard time believing it's true. Like the psalmist who tried to keep his sin from God secret but could not, and discovered relief and joy in confession, I imagine he would find the relief and joy hard to believe after so much agony.

This is not an indictment on any of us who struggle to believe that God's forgiveness can truly be so thorough and so freeing. I dare say to struggle with this is to present our very humanity. Before us was Martin Luther. According to *A History of the Christian Tradition: From the Reformation to the present*, "In his attempt to find peace of mind by his search for a gracious and forgiving God, Martin Luther tried all the usual remedies suggested by the late medieval church – acts of penance, frequent confession and constant prayer. None of these traditional

spiritual remedies brought him the confidence in God's saving love for which he yearned. However, while lecturing on St. Paul's letter to the Romans, he came to the insight that salvation or justification comes by faith alone."¹ God is the one with the power to forgive – we cannot earn it through frequent confession. As Professor Samuel K. Roberts writes, "...the element of trust in the Lord tempers any illusion that the reason for joy is of one's own making. The forgiveness has been offered as a result of God's own pleasure and will."² That is not to say there is not value in confession to God. We wouldn't begin worship with confession if it weren't important, and a necessary part of acknowledging God's worthiness of our worship.

We were not created to go blithely about our days pretending we are flawless or even wishing so. The psalmist tried it and warns us: "While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long...my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer." This season of Lent is a season of penitence and preparation so that we might most fully appreciate the forgiveness given through the action of Jesus' overcoming of death and uniting us with God, all with our brokenness. Pastor Lindsay P. Armstrong refers to the work of the season this way, saying, "It is about the ego-bruising work of Lent: acknowledging sin, **accepting forgiveness**... [emphasis mine]"³ I can see how acknowledging sin is ego-bruising but it had not occurred to me before how much ego must be set aside to accept God's forgiveness.

Armstrong expands upon this particular difficulty of ours, saying that some "stay frozen in a state of perpetual horror at their sin, magnifying its importance." He continues, "Rehearsing their crime repeatedly, as if they alone are guilty of such a thing, they berate themselves repeatedly and ask for forgiveness without repenting because...they are unable to pull their gaze from their sin toward God and the open road of sanctified possibilities lying

¹ https://books.google.com/books?id=na4yDaQKy-gC&pg=PA1&lpg=PA1&dq=martin+luther+frequent+confession+salvation&source=bl&ots=3-JqYO8zzV&sig=heS2fjYDjnUUbYOdx_q1RdT0_3k&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwigzKrkpKjLAhUItYMKHQq2CM0Q6AEIODAF#v=onepage&q=martin%20luther%20frequent%20confession%20salvation&f=false

² *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2*, p. 108.

³ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2*, pp. 104 and 106.

ahead.”⁴ My goodness what we miss when we get stuck in this disbelief in God’s forgiveness. Imagine what the younger son would have missed had he not sought his father’s forgiveness. In a similar way, see what the older son missed because he could not believe the father’s forgiveness of his brother.

The older brother is a representation of the Pharisees and scribes who open our reading from Luke “grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” Jesus responds to their disdain with a story of one lost sheep and one lost coin and then one lost son. What did the Pharisees and scribes miss because they could not believe God’s forgiveness of sinners? When they realized they were wasting away with their groaning and came to God in confession, would they be able to believe that God forgave them?

We have three more weeks of this season of self-selected ego-bruising. That webinar I spoke of last week has absolutely nothing to do with the lectionary and I’m pretty certain it’s provided by a secular organization. Yet Friday’s lesson was about pain and pleasure and stated “We will do far more to avoid pain than we will to gain pleasure.”⁵ If there is a habit we really want to change, the coach guided, we must work to remember the long-term pleasure to be gained by the short-term pain of breaking the comfortable routine. Self-selected ego-bruising. If we want to be able to one day fully accept God’s forgiveness, then we have to let go of the familiar routine of berating ourselves repeatedly and the comfort of gazing at our sins. When the familiar thought of shame or guilt, or the self-loathing, or even just self-disliking, thought, pops up, we can sit in that comfortably familiar place of discomfort or we can remember that in Jesus’ death and resurrection we are assured of a forgiveness already given, and we can remember the joy of the forgiven psalmist, the joy of the welcomed son. You can remember God’s love for you.

At the Wednesday Bible study group a couple of weeks ago, one of the participants spoke of a conversation had with others about what might happen when arriving before God. She had said she thought God would ask “What did you do for the poor?” Another person said, “Did you follow my commandments?” A third person offered this: “Do you

⁴ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2*, p. 106.

⁵ *Ignite Your Life Change Your Habits, Change Your Life* workbook, p. 12.

know how much I love you?”⁶ You are forgiven. Be at peace. Do you know how much God loves you? Go out to love and serve the Lord. Amen and amen.

Let us pray: O Lord, we pray, help us to acknowledge our failings to you so we might fully get on with the work to be done in your world. Amen.

⁶ Thank you, Judith Williams, for this life-changing story.