

Forgiveness

Psalm 32

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

3/31/19

We have two wonderful scriptures about forgiveness, which is good, because forgiveness is a difficult topic. It is wide ranging. We need forgiveness for our own sins - forgiveness from God and often from others. We feel the impact of others' sins and are invited by Jesus to extend forgiveness as he forgives us. That's not easy because your small slight may be my deep wound. How forgiveness works is different for every person. Time and honesty come into play. Memories loom large and change over time. Just as grief does not fall neatly into a series of stages, forgiveness is layered and messy. Psalm 32 focuses on the person who has sinned and needs forgiveness, particularly forgiveness by God.

John Goldingay in *The Old Testament for Everyone* uses three key words descriptive of forgiveness: carry, cover, and count.<sup>1</sup> Carry is his translation for a word that often is rendered forgiveness in modern translations. He argues that God carries our wrong doing – God accepts responsibility for our sin and its consequences and avoids letting that interfere with the relationship we have with God. Even before we ask for forgiveness God carries our sins. Before Calvary, at Calvary, and after Calvary, God carries the sins of the world. When we rebel against God, God does not jettison us or even let the full weight of the consequences of the rebellion descend upon us. God carries that burden and continues to work on the relationship to bring about repentance and change.

The second word is cover. We often attempt to cover over our sins so that no one will see, which is the negative use of this idea. But there is a positive aspect of this. Sins leave a stain – the extreme case is murder which leaves the stain of blood for all to see. Every sin stains us and our surroundings. God works to cover over our sins, not for the sake of hiding our sins, but as a way of remaking us into the image of Christ.

The idea of stains gives us a chance to talk about a dangerous problem that can arise. Guilt is the honest recognition of wrong doing in our lives. But shame is something else and it is deadly. Guilt conveys the idea of wrong doing. Shame goes deeper and can actually carry the message that there is something wrong at the core of a person.

Shame can take on this power because we sin repeatedly and feel trapped in our brokenness. We begin to believe that our sins define who we are. Shame can also grow out of others' evaluation of who we are. We are very quick to define other people by their sins. Its almost

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<sup>1</sup> John Goldingay, Psalm 32, *Old Testament for Everyone - Old Testament for Everyone – Psalms for Everyone: Part 1: Psalms 1-72*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.

impossible for us to avoid this characterization for certain kinds of sin – for example, those who hurt children, those are cruel to animals. But we don't just stop at the extreme cases – we try to load shame up on people for all sorts of different things that can often be unrelated to what they have done.

There are whole topics that invoke shame. Take money for example. By our implied and overt statements, we tell people there is something fundamentally wrong with them if they don't have enough money saved for retirement. Or if they carry a large amount of consumer debt. Or if they have a large amount of college debt. We even enjoy characterizing people who have more money than us as people who must be greedy.

Shame is dangerous because it diverts our attention from the hard but healthy work of actually looking at our sins and mistakes. For example, if I am struggling with debt, but every time I try to face it and I find myself overwhelmed by shame, I will quickly stop thinking about what I need to change and probably turn again to patterns that got me there. Or if I have wealth, but I have listened too long to the voices that say I must have money just because I am greedy, I may never look at those places where I truly do need to become more generous. The power of the Zacchaeus story is that Jesus treats the hated tax collector like a real person rather than a figure to be shamed for his livelihood.

The third word from Goldingay is count. The psalmist wants us to know that God doesn't count our sins. We are all together too good at that. I heard a wonderful sermon in seminary by a woman who described original sin as us learning how to keep score. God gives us beautiful relationships and a beautiful world, but we turn it all into a giant competition about who can get ahead. And one of the ways we try to get ahead of each other is by tracking wrong doing. And, of course, being human, we count the sins of others as much more egregious than our own.

“Jesus, how many times, must I forgive my sister or brother for sinning against me? Will seven times cover it? Try seven times seventy.” God doesn't count sins and neither should we. And for today's sermon we need to hear that for our own sins. We all have areas we come to again and again. That judgment of friend or family we know we shouldn't make. That sinful habit that damages us or others. That stumbling on commitments to daily devotional time. That failure to be generous like we know Jesus wants us to be. Time and time again we find ourselves needing forgiveness and we may be tempted to think, “This time I know God has just had enough. God is going to give up on me.”

God never gives up on us. And every time, every time we sin and then turn back to God and ask for forgiveness, God resets the sin count to zero. We start clean every single time. Let

that amazing and incredibly good news sink in. No matter how many times we sin, when we repent, God doesn't tally it up. God wipes the slate and we start as a new creature in Christ.

The prodigal son story is so powerful. It's a story many can recite by heart and that's good because it sums the gospel beautifully. The younger son takes his inheritance and squanders it. Certainly, he sins. He disrespects his father. He alienates himself from his family. He chooses a life that is very self-damaging.

He winds up slopping the pigs – can't get much lower for a good Jewish boy. He would eat the pig slop if he could and wouldn't get in trouble. He feels guilt for his choices, but he also is locked into a deep place of shame. He is moved to seek his father again but notice where he starts from. "I am no longer worthy to be a son. I am no better than a slave."

Many have been in that pig sty. Many suffer under a shame that convinces them they are no longer worthy to be a child of God. They are certain they are less than human and don't deserve love and forgiveness. But that is not the way the Father sees it. Our prodigal is moved beyond his shame to seek God and God has that power. God can reach into the life of anyone locked up in shame and start her or him on the journey back.

Our prodigal returns with his shameful speech in hand. "Father, I am not worthy to be a son. Make me a slave." The Father will have none of it. He runs to greet the son. He brings out the best clothes, showers the son with fine jewelry, and throws a huge party celebrating his return.

Even at our most sinful moments, even when we heap shame on ourselves or others do so, God does not see a slave. God sees us as children who he longs to see returning. God longs to re-clothe us, shower us with grace, to throw a huge party celebrating our repentance. What good news!

And yet, in his telling of the story, Jesus reminds us that life is complicated. We should be grateful he included the viewpoint of the older brother. Because, we might find we have much in common with him. The good child in the family watching the ne'er do well return to acceptance. The long-time faithful disciple who sees blessings flow into the life of the recent convert. The 30-year company veteran feeling pushed aside by the younger hires.

Just as many of us may have found ourselves in the pig sty, so many of us have found ourselves walking up to the party feeling as though our dedication and work has been ignored. We find we struggle to be as generous as the Father. This story of the forgiving Father reminds us of how vast God's grace is and how hard it is at times for us to accept it.

All of us, at some point, will be the prodigal in the pig sty or perhaps we are there right now, pulled down by our sins, overwhelmed with shame. We can take great comfort in knowing the Father is searching the road for any sign of our return.

And all of us, at some point, will be the older brother or perhaps we are there right now, wondering why God is treating people who don't deserved this treatment with the incredible blessings of grace. We can take great comfort in knowing that the Father will leave the party just to remind us of how much we are loved and how all God has is ours.

Prodigal or older brother, it matters not. God carries our sins. God covers the stains and removes our shame. God doesn't keep a count of our prodigal ways or our judgements against the ones God has welcomed back. God loves and forgives all who are need of grace and that means every single one of us. Amen.