

Sermon Series: “I Believe in...” Sermon Title: “The Forgiveness of Sins”
Exodus 34:1-7a; Psalm 103:1-18; Matthew 18:15-22; 26:26-29; Ephesians 4:29-32
Salem United Methodist Church; August 23, 2019

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We are working our way through the Apostles' Creed. This week we are delving into one of the basic tenets of the Christian faith, the Forgiveness of Sins. Consider these questions. Why is the forgiveness of sins important to our faith? Who sins? Who forgives? Why forgive?

When I think of the forgiveness of sins, I am reminded of a children's picture book called, Harry the Dirty Dog by Gene Zion. Harry is a white dog with black spots who absolutely hates bath time. When it's time for his bath, he runs away and gets into all kinds of mischief until he becomes a dirty dog with white spots. Missing his family, he returns home, but they don't recognize the dirty dog with white spots. Harry convinces his family that he is Harry by taking a bath. As a clean dog, Harry looks like himself again, a white dog with black spots. Harry isn't really a bad dog, just a dog that doesn't want to do what he should do. I see myself in Harry. There are good things I know I should do or need to do, but I'd rather run away than do them. And sometimes I do. Because Harry runs away, he does things he isn't supposed to do and gets dirty. He is so dirty no one recognizes him. Have there been times in your life when you did something wrong that you didn't even recognize yourself? We are all Dirty Harrys. There are times we don't do the things we should and there are times when we do the things we shouldn't! In biblical terms, we all sin. Harry's sin was that he ran away from home and did some things that he shouldn't have. He alienated himself from his family. They didn't even recognize him. They claimed that he wasn't their dog. Our sin alienates us from God and if our sin harms another, we are alienated from them, too. However, even though we are alienated from God, God still claims us. God waits for us to recognize that we have sinned and return home. God waits for us to seek forgiveness and then works with us to renew our relationship with God. This is how God's grace works.

God created a plan for forgiveness back when God gave Moses what we call the Ten Commandments. God knew that the recently freed Israelites needed some rules to live by. Without these rules, there would be utter chaos. God made four rules that focused how we can be in relationship with God and six rules on how we can be in relationship with each other. God also knew that we would break these rules, so God put a plan in place for when we broke the rules and were disobedient. Here is an example of what happens when there isn't a plan. A one year old was eating in her high chair. She would take a hand full of her food and throw it on the floor. After a few times of doing this, her father caught her arm and said, "Do not throw your food on the floor!" As she looked straight into her father's eyes who is holding her arm, she opens her hand filled with food which drops to the floor. The mother laughed and said, "So now what are you going to do?" The father did not have a plan in place. God's plan is this: to be merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin (Exodus 34:6-7). When we run away from God and do the things we know are wrong, or when we don't do the things we should, God welcomes us home with love and forgiveness. God's plan for the Israelites was for them to bring animals which would be slaughtered as an offering for their sins.

In the sermon about "I believe in Jesus..." I talked about how the early Christians saw Jesus as the offering for our sins and I mentioned that Jesus came to show us the character of God. Forgiveness is part of the character of God. Every aspect of Jesus' life on earth illuminated forgiveness. First, the angel told Jesus' earthly father, Joseph, that Jesus would save people from their sins. During his ministry, Jesus was called a friend of sinners, those who felt alienated both from God and other people. Jesus both taught about forgiveness and offered forgiveness. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus creates a way for us to confront each other with how we have been wronged and how to seek forgiveness so that the relationship can be restored. Jesus knows that it is difficult to seek forgiveness or ask for forgiveness, so he says, "I am with you." Then when Peter asks how many times should we forgive. Is seven times enough? Jesus basically replies, "Forgive always and often!" Or 7 x 70 which is 490 times. This is an exaggeration. No one can keep track of this many times! Then during Jesus' last meal with his disciples, he takes the cup and says that it is his blood poured out for us for the forgiveness of

sins. And as he is dying on the cross, Jesus forgave those who were killing him. Even after his Resurrection, Jesus tells his disciples to preach a message of forgiveness of sins to all the nations. Jesus is the personification of God's character: slow to anger, merciful, gracious, steadfast love, faithfulness, the forgiveness of our sins.

We all sin and we all need forgiveness. We all do what we know is wrong which is called the sin of commission. And we all do not do what we know is the right thing to do which is called the sin of omission. The word sin comes from the Latin word, *harmatia*, which means missing the mark, like missing the bull's eye in archery. What are some ways in which we miss the mark? In the fourth century, Ponticus made a list of seven sins which have been called the seven deadly sins. They are lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, anger, envy, and pride. Lust is having a longing or the desire to do something you know you shouldn't do or wanting something you shouldn't have. Gluttony is wanting more than you need. Whether it be food, clothing, shoes, money, etc. Greed is a first cousin to gluttony. Greed is finding a way to possess more than you need. When referring to sloth we are not referring to the slow-moving mammal that hangs upside down in trees. Sloth is being lazy or complacent in doing what we are supposed to do, or being indifferent to evil and the suffering of others. Anger needs no definition. It's ok to be angry about an injustice, but when we use anger to control others, then it is a sin. Envy is a second cousin to lust, gluttony, and greed. When we are envious, we are dissatisfied with who we are and what we have which can lead to many other sins. And pride focuses on oneself and what one has accomplished on one's own without giving any credit to God. All of these focus on the "self". What we want, what we don't want to do, and what we have accomplished.

We can also miss the mark when it comes to Paul's list of the Fruit of the Spirit. We want to bear the spiritual fruit of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23), however, we often miss the mark. And sometimes we miss the entire target! Our sin can weigh us down until we can barely move. In each of us there is the desire to do good and the desire to do harm. Recognizing or becoming aware of when and how we miss the mark or sin, is the first step in the recovery process of sinning. The second step is accessing who has been alienated or has been hurt by our sin. The third step is seeking restoration of this relationship. Jesus said we are to love God and love our neighbors. When we don't love, we do harm. Seeking forgiveness is God's plan for the recovery process of sinning. Seeking forgiveness is more than saying, "I'm sorry." It is also finding ways to rebuild the trust that was broken and then start over, begin anew.

To summarize, we know God forgives us when we repent. We know that God's grace can unload the weight of that sin or break its chain that binds us. We know that we can seek forgiveness when we have harmed others to reestablish that relationship. But is it possible to forgive someone who has harmed us? Perhaps our feelings have been hurt by what was said to us or perhaps we have been physically harmed and traumatized. Is it possible to forgive the one who has harmed us? Yes, but this, too, is a process. We can forgive and say, "Let's start over." But there are sometimes we can't forget the harm that has been done to us. The harm has been too great. We bear the scars, but we can seek to understand and forgive. When we don't forgive the one who has harmed us, we keep the pain alive in ourselves. And it can eat away at our ability to be filled with peace, joy and love. When we don't forgive, we are not harming the one who harmed us. We are harming ourselves.

Jesus had a plan for this, too. He taught us to pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." This says to me that we will be forgiven by God when we forgive others. In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, he stated that before we come to the altar of God, if we have something against another, we are to seek reconciliation (Matthew 5:24). To seek reconciliation requires either seeking forgiveness or forgiving another. Once this has been done, then we can seek reconciliation or forgiveness from God.

So why is forgiveness of sins so important that the early church leaders put it in the Apostles' Creed? Perhaps they recognized that without forgiveness of our sins, without a reconciliation with God, we would have no need to believe in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Forgiveness rebuilds the relationship we have with the Triune God so that we can relearn how to love God more fully *and* forgiveness rebuilds the relationship we have with others so we can relearn how to love our neighbors. Thanks be to God for the forgiveness of sins.

Resources: *Creed: What Christians Believe and Why* by Adam Hamilton

