

## **Lent 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday “New in the Forgiveness of Christ” Cor 5 17**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

Let’s review. The first week of Lent we heard about Jesus who conquers our foe, the devil. The second week of Lent we got the message of the cross. Last week we got this glimpse into the loving heart of God and repentance.

This week we get the goal of all this, and it is scandalous. God means to save the sinner, not just the naughty person, but all sinners. And yes, that includes us. God’s love is so significantly large that it extends even to people we loathe. The cross, that strange mechanism of God, is such that there is no one who is outside of its scope. The heart of God has room for every sinner. The victory Christ has won, He won for the whole of humanity.

This all sounds fine and good. But of course, it gets out-of-hand rather fast. It is one thing to say that God loves all people when we are talking about the right sort of people, or for the hordes of people we don’t really know, but when we start to talk about some folks we know or think we know, we begin to object. After all, we know that there are some folks who are beyond the pale, some whose lives are so nasty, so perverse, so utterly wrong, that they are outside the bounds.

But God, apparently, has not heard that little truth. He doesn’t seem to play by our rules. He goes and does shocking things. Jesus hangs around with prostitutes and sinners, with tax collecting traitors. Who would it be today, the homosexuals and the terrorists, narrow-minded, mean-spirited conservatives, or liberals whose minds are so open their brains fell out? Would Jesus even find a way to love the politicians, congressmen, and the used car salesmen we mistrust so much?

The truth be told, God has some rather harsh words today for the folks like us who are in church. Too often we are pretty sure that there is a significant difference between ourselves and “those sorts of people.” By the end of the Gospel lesson, we find ourselves standing on the outside of the heavenly party grumpily looking in wondering what has happened to our church, our God, and our firm convictions that we are special while God celebrates with the very people we loathe.

In the Epistle reading, Paul exhorts us to see this world totally anew, from a completely different perspective. They are all a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come. And he really does mean everyone when he says this. Just consider the opening words of this letter and Acts 17 if you don't see what I mean. Everyone, even the guy who tried to have the Roman courts kill Paul, is seen through the redemptive work of our Savior, not through the lens of sin. It isn't fair, not one little bit.

Isaiah speaks of what that sinner experiences when God's grace falls on him or her. "With joy we draw water from the well of salvation." Those words remind us of the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman at the well (John 5:14): "The water that I give you will become in you a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

Today is a day in which we hear some of the most potent and wonderful passages of the whole Bible. Besides Isaiah's chapter 12 and Paul's admonition to forgiveness in II Corinthians, lastly there is the parable of the Prodigal Son, or is it really the Forgiving Father, or perhaps the Parable of the Unforgiving Elder Brother. Or, as Robert Capon suggests, is it the parable of the Fattened Calf who had to die so they could all have a party?

Paul is on the outbound leg of his third missionary journey. He received a letter from his congregation in Corinth. This was a special group for him. He had spent 18 months there on the second missionary journey, he had met Apollos and Prisca and Aquila there. But the letter was not a friendly update. It was a list of problems which needed attention. Paul dashed off a response and proceeded on to Ephesus where he would establish himself for three years as he raised funds for the starving folks in Jerusalem.

When he got to Ephesus, he learned the letter had not had its intended effect. A delegation from Cloe's house was waiting for him. In response he sent Timothy and a second letter, which we know as I Corinthians. Timothy came back and reported that the second letter was not well received. Paul went to see them personally. This was a disaster, he calls it a painful visit. They treated him shamefully, they got personal, and he left in anger, with feelings hurt. He sent a third letter, one he calls "harsh." He sent this with Titus.

Meanwhile he is still about his fundraising mission. There are starving people to feed in Jerusalem. Titus' mission with the harsh letter is much more successful. Perhaps it was the letter, perhaps it was Titus, certainly it was the Holy Spirit, but in any event, the people of Corinth apologize and seek Paul's forgiveness and a restoration of the relationship.

Titus is so excited he cannot wait for Paul to return to the home base in Ephesus. He tracks him down in Troas and from there Paul writes his joyful response, a letter we know as II Corinthians. It is actually his fourth letter in this correspondence, but we only have the two of them. This passage we have today is part of that response. For our purposes today, it is important to know that some people who are terribly important to Paul, got into a fight with him, spoke very harsh words and finally they were able to forgive one another.

One of my friends in ministry speaks of the floodgates of love which are opened when a fight is resolved in Christ. Relationships which were strained are strengthened beyond what they had been before the fight. Forgiveness gets you someplace more than where you were before.

There are too many people who have forgotten how to love each other because they have forgotten how to forgive. Paul has forgiven and his language in these first chapters of II Corinthians is effusive. Today he speaks of the mystery which is that forgiveness in Christ. This forgiveness is so much more than merely understanding what someone has done or said to us or failed to do.

Paul attributes all this to God. It is God who has empowered this in Christ. And it is God who has authorized Paul and us to speak these words of forgiveness, as his ambassadors. Paul is appealing to the folks in Corinth to be reconciled, to be one with him and with God again.

And the hardest part is for us to really believe that **we** are forgiven, that God can do that, that God can just take that sin and nail it to Jesus' cross and it is done for. We want to hang on to those sins, imagine that God really has a grudge against us, that He treats us like we treat other folks. But God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and his ways are not our ways. He really does forget our sins. They are forgiven. The debt is gone, totally gone. The Gospel promises that yes, we can see the world with these new eyes. The Spirit works a miracle in us. We can really forgive.

God's gift is a real gift which makes our lives better right now. We can forgive people. It is a beautiful and wonderful thing. We don't have to understand the evil, nor do we have to accept it, or bear a grudge, or nurse some hatred. We can look evil in the eye, feel its full weight and pain and say "Jesus died for that." That word has power, and that truth has power to shape and change the world in which we live. Too often we have sought the solutions to our pain in therapy-land or pharmaceuticals. We sought to prevent the pain with constitutions and bylaws and by not getting too committed in the lives of others. But we ought to be confident in this word, in the Word. We can forgive people because **we** have been forgiven. We can now see people in the knowledge of Christ's loving sacrifice on the cross for the sin of the world.

The story of Paul and Sosthenes makes a great illustration. In Acts 18 Sosthenes tried to kill Paul as the leader of the synagogue, when that did not work his Jewish synagogue members turned on him and beat him. Paul, however, befriended him. Paul was not kidding when he saw everyone new in Christ. Paul lived it out radically – In I Corinthians 1:1 he calls Sosthenes, "brother" – the very fellow who tried to kill him!

Is this not what Christ has done for us, literally? "Father forgive them for they know not what they do?" There is a whole lot of not knowing what we are doing these days.

After the slaughter of the children in the Amish one-room schoolhouse back in October of 2006, members of the Amish community began offering words and hugs of forgiveness when the blood was barely dry on the schoolhouse floor. A grandmother laughed when asked if the forgiveness was orchestrated. "You mean that some people actually thought we had a meeting to plan forgiveness?"

As the father one of the slain girls explained, "Our forgiveness was not our words, it was what we did." Members of the community visited the gunman's widow at her home with food and flowers and hugged members of his family. There were a few words, but it was primarily their hugs, gifts, and mere presence – acts of grace – that communicated Amish forgiveness. Of the 75 people at the killer's burial, about half were Amish, including parents who had buried their own children a day or so before.

Jesus Christ in His life, death, and resurrection for us, freed us from sin, death and the devil. He broke the chains of guilt and shame, addiction and depression, hate and anger. He freed us to forgive, to love one another, and to start every day as a new creation in Christ. If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation, forgiven, born again to forgive others. All this is abundantly given through Word and Sacrament, so that you can abundantly share it with your neighbor.

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting. Amen!