

May 14 – Mother's Day

God Forgives and Welcomes

Acts 13:38-39 & I John 3:20

Today we want to focus on the forgiving and welcoming nature of dogs. It is fitting to do so on a day that celebrates our mothers. They are the people who often are the first ones to teach us about needing to forgive others. How many of us heard, "Now say you are sorry." from them? Or when another said to us they were sorry, it was often mom who prompted us to say, "I forgive you." Also, there is something very heartwarming knowing that mom is waiting for you when you turn towards home.

Now I want to be clear. I am not in any way suggesting that our moms are like dogs. But on this day when we celebrate mothers, as we look at how our dogs remind us of God's love and forgiveness, I can't help but see some parallels. Both our mothers and our four-legged theologians help us to understand that our God is a loving and forgiving and also a welcoming God.

Our quote for the day is, "To err is human—to forgive canine." (unknown) Now this is true confession time, but relax I am not going to make you raise your hand or stand and confess. You have had a really bad day. You come home and your dog comes up to greet you, just like they always do. But today, their barking gets on your nerves. Their jumping up on you isn't cute, it's annoying. They aren't doing anything different than they always do but your attitude about life is awful. What do you do? You take it out on the dog. You yell at them to get down and you walk by them without petting them. They are confused by your actions but you could care less. Ever been there and done that? It happens.

How does your dog react? Does he go in the other room and not have anything to do with you until you come in and apologize? Does she run outside and head down the street looking for a better master and friend? Does he hold a grudge and bites you the next time you come home? No! What happens is that beloved dog realizes you are having a difficult time and soon after you have settled into your chair comes over, puts

their head in your lap and looks at you with those big eyes that lets you know, it's okay. All is forgiven. I love you.

We can learn something from a dog, can't we? All of those responses that we said a dog would never do are ways people react when they come in contact with others who are acting unloving and uncaring. Intellectually we understand that they are having a bad time, that this isn't the way they normally act, but our feelings are hurt, we are offended and so we respond in kind. Most of us have probably been guilty of doing one of the following: We ignore them, refusing to talk to them until they say they are sorry and sometimes even that isn't enough. We drop them as friends and go find other people to hang out with. We hold grudges waiting for a chance to get even. We sometimes adopt the "don't get mad, get even" philosophy of life. "To err is human to forgive, canine." The next time we have issues with another, take a deep breath and think, "How would a dog handle this?" and do likewise.

Sometimes the hardest person to forgive is ourselves. I John 3:20 says, "Even though our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts." We know ourselves all too well and we get upset with how we act and react. Often we can begin to appreciate God's unconditional love for us, we might even be able to offer that, at least at times to others, but we find it extremely hard to love ourselves and offer forgiveness to ourselves. When we act poorly towards another we find it hard to let it go, forgive ourselves, and to believe God would forgive us. God is greater than our hearts. God forgives. We have done something in the past and the memory still haunts us. We have asked for forgiveness. Intellectually we understand God forgave us. But we can't forgive ourselves. We continue to beat ourselves up over what we have done. We have to let go.

Our society has raised us to focus on our defects instead of celebrate our successes. If we ask someone to list five things they need to work on, most can come up with that list in a matter of seconds. If you ask them to tell you five things they are really good at, they sometimes stammer and look embarrassed. They don't want to seem proud or bragging. This mindset keeps us from letting go, forgiving others and forgiving ourselves. Yet we know God forgives. How do we know that? Just look at our

dogs. The Bible says that God created all things, plants, animals and humans. No one would think that a dog's capacity to forgive would be greater than God the creator. So, that forgiving four-legged friend reminds us of how much we are forgiven. How we are to forgive ourselves and others.

The other thing a dog does is welcome. We have all seen the videos of dog's madly welcoming home a soldier after they have been gone for a bit. Diana Stoffer tells this about Sadie, their current pet. When someone arrives at our door, she barks – not to alert us to an incursion into our family's territory, but to greet and to welcome the stranger. Everything she does is done gleefully, with the knowledge that she is joyful just to be alive.

Marion Griswold talks about their beloved Schatzie. "She grieved when we would put her in a kennel when we made a long journey, sometimes having to be hand-fed by kennel staff. She would joyously sprint to the car when she was picked up, and the back-seat window had better be down, 'cause she was going to leap into the car, into a wriggling mass of kids, getting dog kisses!

There is something warming and reassuring about that kind of response, whether it is you returning home or your dog coming to greet you. As you have heard me say already, we had to bless our big black dog into life eternal a few months back. One of the hardest things to do was to come home the first days after he was gone. The house seemed too quiet. Now I enjoy being greeted by Jenny but it isn't done with quite the same enthusiasm! You don't know how much you come to expect that greeting until you no longer have it.

That image of welcome is an important one for us. I think about a story I heard many years ago.

A sick man turned to his doctor, as he was leaving the room after paying a visit, and said, Doctor, I am afraid to die. Tell me what lies on the other side. Very quietly the doctor said, I don't know. You don't know? the man said.

You, a Christian man, do not know what is on the other side?

The doctor was holding the handle of the door, on the other side of which came a sound of scratching and whining. As he opened the door, a dog sprang into the room and leaped on him with an eager show of gladness.

Turning to the patient, the doctor said, "Did you notice my dog? He's never been in this room before. He didn't know what was inside. He knew nothing except that his master was here, and when the door opened, he sprang in without fear.

I know little of what is on the other side of death, the doctor continued, but I do know one thing: I know my Master is there, and that is enough. And when the door opens, I shall pass through with no fear, but with gladness."

If we come to expect an eager greeting from our dog who is always at the door to welcome us does that not give us courage and hope? Let me end by sharing about Doris. She lived for five years with pancreatic cancer. Her mind remained sharp almost until the end, even as her body was wasting away. She had me come to the house one day when her husband and children were present. She wanted to talk about her death and her funeral. She did it when all could hear so there would be no misunderstandings. She began, "I have been a Christian all of my life. I have been living in anticipation of this day when I will go to be with God. My death is not a bad thing, but a good thing. Yes, I will be sad to leave my family and friends. Yes, I know they will grieve, but my death is a time to celebrate. Here is what I want. Everyone is to dress in bright colors, no black allowed." She had lived for many years in New Orleans so she wanted everyone to wear Mardi Gras beads. She wanted helium balloon bouquets instead of flowers and all upbeat music. At the reception following she wanted a Dixie Land band and for her oldest grandson to lead everyone in a toast celebrating her entry into life eternal. And we did it all. She knew where the master was, she was excited to be with him. This is the promise of our faith.

So our four-legged friends remind us about forgiveness. Who do you need to forgive today following your dog's example? Do you need to forgive yourself? And let us remember always the joy of homecoming. That is our reassurance as we live and face the end of these days. May we share that gift of welcoming with others and when our time comes trust the one who loves us and forgives us to welcome us home.