

July 9 – I Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins

Psalm 103:9-12

Adam Hamilton begins his chapter on the statement, “I believe in the forgiveness of sins” with these words: “A Friend who was a bit skeptical of the Christian faith once said to me, ‘Why is it that Christians are so obsessed with convincing people they are sinners and laying a guilt trip on them? Every time I go to church it feels like another guilt trip. What a depressing religion!’”

It is certainly true that there are churches whose primary focus is on sin and whose weekly worship services are laden with guilt. But that doesn’t reflect the emphasis of the Christian faith as found in the Apostles’ Creed. We need to remember that the creed doesn’t say, “I believe that human beings are sinners,” though that is assumed. It says, “I believe in the forgiveness of sins.” The emphasis in both the Creed and the Christian faith is not on guilt, but grace; it is not on sin but forgiveness.”

So today, we are going to focus, not on sin, but on forgiveness. One of the great pieces of news concerning our faith is that we don’t have to be defined by the worst things we have ever done. Too often we hold on to that moment, refusing to let it go and, in so doing, it can define all the rest of our lives. It becomes a set of chains that bind us to the past. It doesn’t have to be that way. This also means that you don’t have to be tomorrow who you were yesterday or even today. God wants to forgive you. God is the God of the Second Chance. Ours is a gospel of redemption. God offers new life for old, grace and redemption for guilt and shame. And we can, and likely must, claim this every day.

Just let what I have been sharing sink in. What does it mean to say God is the God of Second Chances? I think about the woman who made a complete disaster of her first marriage. You mention things you should not do and she had done them. She lost custody of her children as well as seeing her marriage dissolve. Because she believed in second chances she finally turned her life around. She went back to school, got a job, finally reconnected with her children, met a new man, and is now happily married. Does she regret her past choices? You bet. Does she dwell on them or let

them define her? No. Instead, she moves forward in life accepting the forgiveness of God and celebrating that her children have forgiven her as well.

We all need forgiveness. We need it every day. One of the things I notice in talking to people is how often they pretend that sin has no power over them and that they are not really sinners. Sinners are those who do the big no no's like murder and drug dealing. What we do are little mistakes, indiscretions, but certainly not sin. They need God to guide them and help them, but forgive them as sinners, well maybe once in a while. Have you ever been there? Maintaining this illusion shows a lack of self-awareness—and self-awareness is the very thing we need in order to turn away from sin and resist its power. We are sinners.

There are two types of sins. There are the sins of commission and sins of omission. Most of you have heard those terms. Sins of omission are those times we sin because we don't do something. We should have been forgiving to another but we refused. Or, we are called upon to help another but don't, for a lot of, what we feel are, good reasons. By our lack of actions, our omissions, we miss the mark, which is the definition of sin, of what God would have us do. Sins of commission are those times we willingly disobey God. We plot revenge deciding to not get mad but to get even, when we know we are called upon to forgive. We lie, we speed, or something else. John Wesley, our founder, believed it was possible to come to a place of such holiness that we would never commit a sin of commission. He called it living a perfect life. Wesley never thought he made it! I doubt we have either.

We need to acknowledge our sins because among the many effects of sin in our lives is an alienation or that which causes us to put up walls. These are walls that separate us from God and from others. We hide behind these walls and it blocks a full embrace of God's love and it keeps us from reaching out to others in love as well. But this is not a hopeless thought. Remember God will forgive our sins. God is the God of second chances. This is why we say we believe in the forgiveness of sins.

Also, there is the challenge to forgive others. If we don't forgive others we end up taking a new set of chains upon ourselves, chains of bitterness and resentment that

again bind us to our past. This is one of the sins of commission that we tend to embrace more than we should. Forgiving others is not the same as saying that what the individual did was OK; rather it is choosing not to hold on to the wrong done to us, nor to hold it over the head of the one who wronged us. Forgiveness doesn't necessarily release the one who sinned from all consequences. Sometimes consequences are redemptive. But we need to remember that we are not the judge. We don't get to state the consequences. That is for God. Forgiving is something we do for ourselves.

Who do you need to forgive this day? Is there a person you are holding a grudge against? You have heard it before: you can get bitter or better. Again, forgiving others is not saying that what happened didn't matter. It is saying, "I choose to release you, and I choose to release me." Where do you need to find release?

Forgiveness is not the same as forgetting. We can forgive someone but remember what they did and be careful that we do not get ourselves in a similar situation. One person tells of sharing with a friend about a medical condition. She told the friend to keep it quiet. She was surprised when others asked her how she was doing. Her friend had put it on a prayer chain, in great detail and without permission. The friend's excuse was that she hadn't broken trust she had just asked others to pray. That breach of trust hurt. She forgave the friend but she has been careful to never share with her again anything that she wants to be kept confidential.

Let me share a story of forgiveness. As I am sharing it, put yourself in the situation. It happened at one of my churches. Many years before two families had gotten into a big legal fight over a property line. After many years of litigation the issue was finally resolved, in the courts but not in their hearts. The victors in the suit were angry that their neighbors had forced them to spend all of this money. Ever since they had done little things in retribution such as making sure their daughter ran for homecoming queen the same year as the other daughter ran and gloating when their daughter was elected. The losers felt that they had been robbed by the courts. They let everyone know that you could never trust that other family. Anytime one of their kids got into trouble in school you were sure to hear, well that is just like them. Both of these families went to the same church and their animosity was lived out even there. If one of

them was chair of a committee the other side all resigned from that committee. We were now to the grandchildren still carrying on the feud. This was a small town and so everyone knew about it. When I came to be their pastor I soon learned about it and how it colored everything, from who could serve on what committee to making sure neither family was on the counting team because then the other family would quit giving. I don't know how many sermons had been preached about forgiveness, letting go of the past and all the rest, and yet it persisted. I was there just a short time and I know I made no dent. That church is all but dead now. It wasn't just this feud that killed it, but that anger and resentment didn't help and when things got tough they refused to work together. People have gone to other churches, the two families have gone their separate ways. Yet that was a church that once a month said this creed. They said they believed in the forgiveness of sins but never did it.

When we say we believe in the forgiveness of sins, we are recognizing that all of us need forgiveness, we are affirming that God is willing to forgive our sins; and we are accepting Christ's call to forgive others. Where do you need forgiveness? Where do you need to let go of the chains of the past that bind you? Who do you need to forgive? Where do you need to release them so that you do not carry new chains of bitterness? This simple phrase is full of such hope, we worship a God of Second Chances, but we need to do our part.