

“Forgiveness: The Divine Answer”
Lent 1 B (off-Lectionary)

Texts: Psalm 32:1-5
Jeremiah 31:31-34

Preached: 2/22/15



There are websites where people can anonymously post apologies, something like.... *I'm sorry for cussing you out earlier today.*

You tried to cut me off on a residential street and I just lost my temper. I regret it. Granted that you were partly in the wrong...but so was I. I should not have retaliated. I was just really having a rough day...Anyway my conscious is eating me up, and so if said person is reading this by some miracle then I'd like to say that I'm really, really sorry for my outburst. What's done is done, but I hope you can at least accept my apology. Thank you and peace.



Or To all my high school classmates,

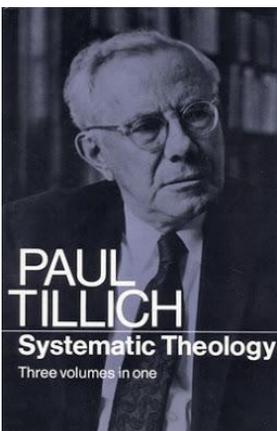
I am so sorry for those mornings when I came to school without brushing my teeth. I don't know where I got the idea that if I didn't eat, I didn't need to brush. I know you tried to hint, but I didn't "get it." Signed – I'm sure you remember me...and not fondly!



Or sometimes they are more serious as in...

For all the things that happened to you as a kid that I never knew about. Maybe you were told not to tell me, but I should have been there for you, and you should have been able to tell me anything. For the fact that you weren't and I wasn't, I am truly sorry. Signed -- Mom

Some who post on such sites apparently have no idea how to reach those they have wronged. Some of the postings are humorous; some are far more weighty. I think all of us can find a part of ourselves in one of them.



Paul Tillich, the 20th century existentialist theologian, offers a perspective that speaks to the apologizers above...and to all of us.

Tillich wrote, “Forgiveness is an answer, the divine answer, to the question implied in our existence.”

Perhaps there are multiple questions “implied in our existence” as Tillich puts it. These questions are answered by God’s forgiveness.

For example, let's take the apology of the mother. If you are the child who has been wounded, who perhaps experienced abuse when you were little, and whose mother did nothing to stop it, the question implied is: *How do I keep bitterness, anger, hate, or the desire for revenge from consuming me?* If you are the mother who feels great guilt because you didn't step in to stop the abuse, there are perhaps two questions implied: *How can I be reconciled to the one I wronged?* And – *How can my burden of guilt be removed?*



Every one of us asks questions like these – and God's answer to each of them is forgiveness. While abuse may not have been part of our story, at some point each one of us has been wronged, at some point we have failed to intervene to stop someone else from being wronged, and in one way or another we've all wronged others. If we are not to spend our lives stumbling in the dark as wounded, angry victims, we must know and carry with us the answer—God's answer: forgiveness.

Making sense of forgiveness means talking about sin, a word certain to make some people cringe. The Greek and Hebrew words most often translated as sin in the Bible



refer to “missing the mark” (think archery and an arrow that misses the target) or “straying from the path” (picture someone wandering off a trail and getting hopelessly lost).

The implication is that there is a way we are meant to follow... and when we do, we have a proper relationship with God and others. We are called to love. We are meant to do justice. We were created to care for each other. God made us to live in truth, to be faithful, to do the kind and loving thing. If we always acted this way, there would be no need for forgiveness.



Our reality, unfortunately, is that most of us struggle to act in godly ways, regardless of our faith. We stray, too often and too easily. Temptations draw us away from the path of Christ.

We know the Bible opens with a story of temptation. That story tells how Adam and Eve, struggled and succumbed to sin in the Garden of Eden. God offered paradise if this first couple would obey a simple rule: don't eat from one tree.



They could eat from anything else they wanted, but, essentially God said to them, “this one tree will bring harm to you and your offspring. This is the path: enjoy everything, and be fruitful and multiply. Just avoid that one particular tree.” But, of course, that was the one tree they came most desperately to desire.

Adam and Eve's story is our story. We get drawn away from the right path. We fail to do the right and loving thing, we hurt others and we disobey God. I might hurt you and you might retaliate and hurt me back. The gap between us and God widens. We feel sin as a wall around us, or a gulf between us.

Psalm 32: 3-4: When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long,
+ For day and night
your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.

As our sins accumulate, we feel further and further removed from God. We struggle to feel God's presence. Life becomes more and more a grind. The Psalmist describes the weight of sin... alienation from God.

*For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
My strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.*

Another Psalm (Psalm 38), says, "My guilt has overwhelmed me/ like a burden too heavy to bear."

Without forgiveness, refusing to be reconciled through repentance, we end up carrying the weight of our sins. We see this illustrated in the backpack, full of stones. It doesn't make sense to lug such weight around and keep adding more.



Sins collect, when we keep them from God – lugging enough of them on your back will weigh you down.

Like an overloaded backpack, carrying around our sin is painful...it pulls on your shoulders, strains on your neck and back. This is also what sins do to our spiritual well-being.

But there is an alternative – an answer. In Jesus Christ God provided a savior and through him offers us forgiveness and a new beginning.



Jesus came for sinners. Once while Jesus was teaching, the religious leaders brought to him a woman caught in the act of adultery. The leaders were carrying stones, since the penalty for her sin, according to the Law of Moses, was death by stoning. The leaders aimed to entrap Jesus, knowing that he showed grace to sinners. They asked him deceitfully, "What shall we do with this woman?"

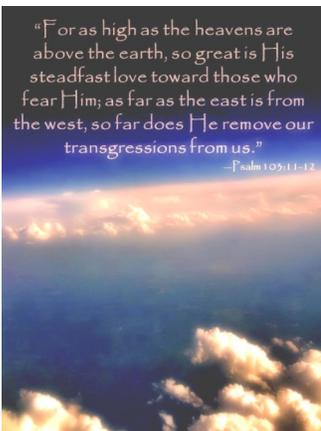
Do you remember Jesus' reply? He said, "The one of you who is without sin, cast the first stone." One by one the religious accusers dropped their stones and walked away. Then Jesus turned to the woman. She was ashamed and filled with guilt, but he looked her in the eye and said, "Woman, where are your accusers? Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

"For as high as the heavens are
above the earth, so great is His
steadfast love toward those who
fear Him; as far as the east is from
the west, so far does He remove our
transgressions from us."
—Psalm 103:11-12

Even with his last breaths, Jesus was all about forgiveness. As he hung on the cross, he prayed for his executors: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Jesus modeled the extravagant grace that is the core of God's heart and character. Psalm 103 reads:

The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love...He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; As far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.



Each of us has done things we regret and cannot change – yesterday, last week, let alone in the last month or year or decade. Some of these sins make us cringe or even cry when we think of them. But we need not carry such burdens, if we will only turn to God. Even as we turn to God, God is already reaching out to us, waiting for us with open arms. (Think of the Father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son.)



All we have to do is accept and receive this grace, open ourselves to it, take it in. Our acceptance comes in the form of repentance, a change of heart that results in a change in behavior. We admit that we have veered from the path God intends, that we have hurt others and wounded our relationship with God...then we confess to the other person and do what we can to make amends. And we confess to God and ask for mercy and forgiveness, and then we turn back to the right path.

When we do that – God forgives. It's like dropping that 60-pound burden of a backpack. You can breathe again...dance again. You can run and not grow weary, walk and not faint, because you have experienced the grace of God. It's beautiful, if not easy.



There was a much-loved professor in the Philippines, who carried the burden of a sin he had committed many years earlier. Although he had led many to the mercy of Christ, he struggled with his own transgression. He had repented many times, but he could not accept that God had forgiven him. It had been decades, and still, he felt no peace.



A former student of his, a woman who loved God deeply claimed to have regular dreams and visions in which she spoke face to face with Christ. People from all over the islands came to speak with her, bringing questions for her to take to the Lord and then waiting for the answers she brought back. The professor was skeptical, but he dared to hope just a little. He decided to put her to the test. One day he went to her and said, “When I was in college, I did something wrong. No one else knows anything about it. The next time you talk to Jesus, I would like you to ask him what that sin was. If he tells you, I’ll know you were really talking to him.”



Although he presented it as a test, what the professor really hoped was that this woman might say something that would relieve the awful burden of his guilt over this now ancient sin.

The hours turned to days and the days into nearly two weeks when finally the woman came to him again. “Well,” he said, “did you have any of your visions? Did you speak with Jesus?”

Yes, I did, she said.

“Did you talk to him about, you know, about my question?” There was no hiding his agitation.

Yes, she said, I did.

“Did he answer you?”

Yes, I did, she said.

“Did you talk to him about, you know, about my question?” There was no hiding his agitation.

Yes, she said, I did.

“Did he answer you?”

Yes, as a matter of fact, he did, she said.

By now his heart was pounding and beads of sweat were forming at his temples. “Well, what did he say?”

“I told him, ‘my professor committed a sin when he was in college,’” she said. “He wants to know if you know what that sin was. Jesus looked right at me and said, ‘Ah yes, your professor’s sin. Funny thing, I just don’t remember it anymore.’”



Maybe Jesus doesn't forget our sins, but rather chooses NOT to remember them. Next Sunday we will celebrate communion. When Jesus lifts the cup before his disciples, he refers to “the new covenant” – a clear reference to the words of Jeremiah. God says, “I will make a new covenant with my people...I will write my law on their hearts. They will all know me from the least to the greatest, and I will forgive their iniquity. And I will remember their sin no more.”



You can certainly choose to carry the burden of your sins with you all the time. But we are invited to give up that heavy burden – allowing the Lord to take it from us and set us free.



For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who honor Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far He removes our sins from us. Psalm 103:11,12

Then, let us repent, turn back to the right path, saying, “Lord, make me new as only you can. Give me strength, where I have not had it before. Show me the way you would have me go.”

As far as the east is from the west, so far shall the LORD remove your sin from you.