

FORGIVENESS: In God's Image

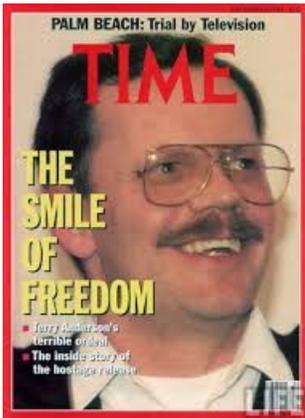
Texts: Genesis 1:27
Acts 7:58-8:1

Preached: 3/22/15



We have been contemplating this Lenten Season what it means to forgive. We have used various images and stories to illustrate what happens when we lay down our burdens. Last week we recalled the story of Joseph and the Dreamcoat. Pastor Jo showed us that Joseph's family was messy...they had issues...like all families. But God was working in that family, even when the brothers intended evil, God was intending good. Despite forces in this world working against God's plans, God creatively works for love, well-being, hope. This morning we conclude our sermon series.

God's forgiveness is powerful, as it works in our life, as we allow it to work, as we commit ourselves to it.



When I was in college, studying journalism, we discussed a hostage crisis in the Middle East. Terry Anderson, bureau chief for the Associated Press in Beirut, Lebanon, was taken hostage. He spent 7 years in captivity before being released.

I read Anderson's book, DEN OF LIONS, about his ordeal as a hostage and how he experienced the power of forgiveness. He admits that, as a Catholic, he was often told to forgive, but the gospel never became real for him until he began to forgive his captors. *Forgiveness doesn't have anything to do with one's enemies*, he says. Forgiveness doesn't mean there isn't any anger, but is rather, letting go of that anger. If you hold on to the anger, you only hurt yourself, family and friends. He also observes that his journey toward forgiveness did not start after he was released, but while he was still a hostage.

The Bible begins with the story of creation. At the very center of that story is this bold statement: *God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.*

My Hebrew Bible professor,



Walter Brueggemann, pointed out that this statement is not an easy one, but was fascinated that humankind is spoken of as singular and plural at the same time. This peculiar formula seems to convey that all people stand in solidarity before God. But on the other hand, humankind is a community, male and female. And none is the full image of God alone. Only in community of humankind is God reflected. God is, according to this bold affirmation, imaged not in each of us, but in us when we are in relationship...community.



So when I read that God created humanity in the image of God, I should not imagine that God looks like myself, for it has little to do with me, myself, and nothing really to do with how we look, our physical appearance. Rather, it has everything to do with other ways we were created as a community to reflect God's character. To be made in the image of God means we have the innate capacity to love, to reason, to create, to show compassion, to give, to sacrifice, and, yes, to forgive.

Tragically the image of God in us becomes obscured. The Bible tells the poetic story: Adam and Eve chose to eat the forbidden fruit and paradise was lost.

Cain became jealous of his brother Abel, which tempted him to do the unthinkable – murder his brother. Lamech wasn't satisfied with one wife, he needed two. He sought retribution and killed a man who had wounded him. All this happens in the first five chapters of the Bible. By the events in chapter 6, God's image in the world was so blurred that God grieved about ever creating humanity in the first place.

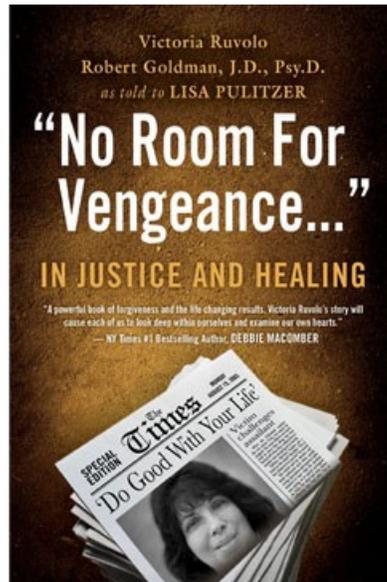
We refer to both the cause and results of the distortion of God's image by using the same word, SIN – straying from God's way. As we noted previously, sin signifies both the condition of our hearts, and the acts we commit because of that condition. It is sin that often leads us to say and do things for which we need forgiveness. And it is sin that sometimes keeps us from seeking, or extending forgiveness. But when we do ask for or extend forgiveness, we live into God's image. It is for this reason that forgiveness, when extended, is not only powerful but beautiful.



Several years ago, Victoria Ruvolo of New York was selected as that year's "Most Inspiring Person" by *Beliefnet*, an online faith community. A group of teenagers had used a stolen credit card to go shopping and had bought, among other things, a frozen turkey.



As they were driving one of the teenagers, a young man named Ryan, decided to throw the turkey out the car window into oncoming traffic. The turkey smashed through Ruvolo's windshield, crushing her face. She survived the accident, but required 10 hours of reconstructive surgery and a tracheotomy tube.



That fall, Victoria attended Ryan's sentencing. To everyone's surprise, she asked the judge to be lenient toward the young man, noting, "Each day I thank God simply because I'm alive. I sincerely hope you have also learned from this awful experience, Ryan. There is no room in my life for vengeance. Ryan wept and expressed remorse for his action, and was sentenced to six months in prison, rather than the maximum 25 years.

That day Victoria went on to tell Ryan, "I truly hope that by demonstrating compassion and leniency I have encouraged you to seek an honorable life. If my generosity will help you mature into a responsible, honest man whose graciousness is a source of pride to your loved ones and your community, then I will be truly gratified, and my suffering will not have been in vain...Ryan, prove me right."

Victoria Ruvolo's story demonstrates redemption, mercy and grace. It resonates with us at a deep level, because in it we see the image of God.



The world saw that same image when Nelson Mandela, after being imprisoned by South Africa's apartheid government for 27 years, called upon black South Africans to demonstrate love instead of hate, and modeled this mercy in his own life in powerful ways. His call for mercy helped prevent the bloody violence many had anticipated with the fall of apartheid. The world saw the image of God in this act, not only of Mandela but of black South Africans.

Twice the Apostle Paul describes Jesus as the image of God (2 Corinthians 4:4 and Colossians 1:15). Jesus came to restore humanity -- to recover and heal the image of God in us. In his life, death and resurrection, Jesus not only offers forgiveness and redemption but also shows us the image of God. Through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit that image is being restored in us

Jesus was forever speaking of forgiveness. But on the cross he demonstrated it when he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Besides his mother, and a few other of the women close to him, we can only speculate who might have heard these words. But it's possible there may have been a young man named Stephen in the crowd that day, who heard Jesus utter his prayer. Stephen was not one of the apostles but he was a follower of Jesus. If he was there, it's not hard to imagine that Jesus' example of mercy deeply moved Stephen, and that he would never forget it.

The words of Jesus' prayer on the cross painted a picture of the image of God, and could have shaped how Stephen would live the rest of his life.

We do know, that following the resurrection of Christ, that Stephen was chosen by the apostles to serve the fledgling church, ministering to those in need while sharing the gospel with all who would listen. The Book of Acts describes Stephen as “full of grace and power.” Stephen’s life and ministry were so compelling that some who opposed the Christian movement began to speak ill of him. They stirred up others against him, making false accusations that Stephen had blasphemed against God. He was arrested and accused before the same ruling council that had condemned Jesus to death. For his blasphemy he was ruled guilty and sentenced to death by stoning.



We read the description this morning.

Saul watched the travesty, as a righteous man was unjustly put to death. Once more we see a distortion of God’s image in this act of cruelty masquerading as religious devotion. Saul would be haunted by this memory of Stephen. He watched him in those last moments, saw the way he knelt and prayed as he was being stoned, heard his words, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

In this remarkable act of mercy, the seeds were sown that would lead to Saul’s own conversion to Christ, after which he would be known as Paul the Apostle. Mercy has the power to change even the hardest of hearts.

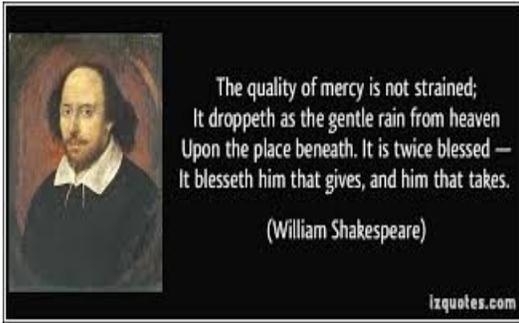


The older we get, the more time we likely spend in funeral homes, marking the loss of beloved family members, friends, neighbors. Sometimes we grieve with mixed emotions. The crowds at the calling hours come with all sorts of memories, experiences, baggage. Those who come to pay their respects surely have multiple things on their minds. Some undoubtedly come longing for some kind of final reconciliation with the deceased or the family. Some may come to forgive, others seeking forgiveness. Many likely assumed there would be time, more time, to say difficult words, to bring up painful subjects, to reconcile. These ones may struggle with feelings of regret. Some may carry that regret as a burden for a long time to come.

It’s a reminder to us.



What about those in your life you need to forgive? Or those whose forgiveness you seek? There is still time. Don’t fall asleep! Don’t wait too long. Don’t bear such a burden indefinitely. Begin the process. Start a conversation. Invite God to guide you and support you. You may not get everything you seek, but you will have tried, and God will be with you, and what does not get resolved can be left in God’s hands.



Shakespeare wrote of mercy –

“It is an attribute of God himself”

and

“it blesseth him that gives and him that takes.”

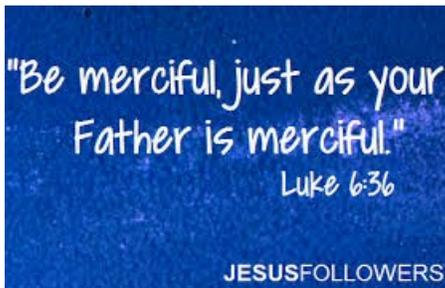
We need it – this mercy...that ultimately comes from God.

Forgiveness is absolutely essential to our well-being. If we are going to live into the image of God, we must learn how to receive it and also extend it.

I trust you are here, in church, because you have a sense that there is power in God, the healing power of love and forgiveness that leads to freedom. This is the power of the Gospel – the power of the life and story of Jesus Christ...which we will celebrate, act out, remember, lift up, sing, pray, proclaim in these coming two weeks, now, leading up to Easter.

God, whose love we have spurned, and whose ways we have rejected, sends his son, Jesus to rescue us.

He is willing to go to any length, including suffering and even to his death to procure and proclaim our forgiveness. We look at the cross and hear Jesus crying out, “Father, forgive them!” When we embrace Jesus, accept God’s offer of forgiveness through him, we receive the power to turn away from our sin and toward the God of mercy.



When we choose to show mercy, the image of God shines in us.

Forgiveness has the power not only to change us, but to change those who receive mercy from us... and maybe, even, to change the world!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.