



Pastor Ken's Sermon

**SERMON – 4TH SUNDAY IN LENT
JOHN 3:14-21 AND EPHESIANS 2:1-10
MARCH 14, 2021
“RADICAL FORGIVENESS”**

I get a weekly health and wellness newsletter from National Public Radio - interesting articles and a nice mix of topics. Been a little saturated with “*you know what*” articles this past year but all in all worth a weekly glance. Couple of months ago amidst all the physical health topics you’d expect, there was one on how the “*forced migration*” of families back into their homes, at close quarters for long stretches might be straining family relationships. You don’t say? So, the article offered perspectives on forgiveness. How could a pastor pass that up?

I knew the approach to forgiveness would be more likely from a mental health perspective. Most of what the article said came from something called “*The Radical Forgiveness Worksheet*” by a fellow named Colin Tipping. I clicked the link and found the document, subtitled “*An Instrument for the TRUE Transformation of a Grievance.*” It was a 20-step journey to forgiveness – yes you heard me, 20 steps! Now I have to say Mr. Tipping’s goal and the goal of forgiveness as we in the Christian Church would define it is not entirely at odds. By step 20, he wants the aggrieved party to be able to say they’ve released their anger or hurt, and that reconciliation had occurred between them and whoever hurt them.

Except that along the way, somewhere around step 13 if I recall, the transgression just sort of “goes away” not as I could tell from conversation between the parties, not from repentance and contrition – those words are never mentioned – but in a process that more or less “un-sins the sin” and turns the action that gave rise to the “grievance” into a sort of “growth experience” for both parties, but particularly the aggrieved party.

But perhaps most telling about the worksheet, which as I said, I understood going in was not intended to be crafted on a Christian understanding of forgiveness, was nevertheless that “a higher power” does enter the process at the very end. Step 18 suggests the forgiving person turn to “*the higher power I think of as*” (then you fill in the blank) and entrust their now resolved grievance to said power in the confidence that by so doing (it) will help them to see how the whole thing was for their good and that there never really was anything to forgive in the first place. A note of appreciation to the other party concludes the process, by saying “*I completely forgive you, for I now realize you did nothing wrong, and everything is in Divine order.*” Hmm.

I applaud Mr. Tipping for wanting to reconcile folks and bring peace to hurting souls. That must be the goal of the church’s ministry as well. Forgiveness is a big deal, because sin erodes our souls and hinders if not outright ruins relationships. But I must say this...despite the comprehensiveness of his worksheet – I really was quite impressed with it – the whole process was...complicated and in the end, seems to have taken a viper and turned it into a therapy animal.

Our lessons today remind us that is not such a good idea. There is nothing simple about forgiveness. It involves human persons and so unhealthy measures of pride, prejudice and emotions. But when it happens, and it does, to our eternal good, all our lessons today agree its origin is God.

Forgiveness is a painstaking, wonderful work – but it is God’s work both for us and in us – not our work. Some folks look upon our Old Testament lesson today from Numbers as some sort of *“hocus-pocus only superstitious ancients could believe such a thing”* story. I’d be inclined to at least classify it as odd, if not for the fact Jesus took the story quite seriously.

To be clear, the Israelites were not healed because they looked at a bronze snake on a pole – they were healed because they believed what God promised he would do for them if they did! Martin Luther had quite a time with this story of the bronze serpent. In his sermons on John 3 he took pains to use the serpent illustration to pierce illusions that forgiveness was or could be a human accomplishment. Ephesians 2:8-10 was plain enough for him to know the place of good works – they belong to the Christian life but only as evidence of that life – not its source.

With language reminiscent of the sacraments, which convey God’s grace through his word joined to a physical element, Luther said the antidote to the fiery serpent of sin that lives within us and in turn makes us such unforgiving people, was to look upon *“a dead serpent lifted up – Christ, limp, lifeless, hanging in disgrace upon a cross.”* Luther knew full well that a bronze statue was useless – he said the Israelites could have looked at it a thousand times to no avail if they’d not first been told by God this is how they’d be healed. For Christians, Luther said, Jesus could have died upon a cross a thousand times, and we’d be helped just as little if not for those most wonderful words that preceded this serpent story – *“for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”*

This helps us understand that faith – which Luther defined as “looking at Jesus” is the only thing that reconciles a person to God. It also helps us understand what is meant when, in John 3:18 it says *“whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son”* – or as it says in Mark 16:16 *“he who believes and is baptized will be saved. But whoever does not believe will be condemned.”* Harsh words even as their intent is gracious. What they insist upon, or for our purposes allow, is for our blessed Lord Jesus do all the work of reconciling, forgiving, and one day “lifting us up” to eternal life.

We do our work with our eyes – the eyes of our heart that is, when we look and see what sort of grace God has shown us in Christ. It is the eyes of faith that work for us and let us “see our salvation.” By contrast, those who try such difficult, nay impossible work by themselves will only find the fiery serpent of sin keeps condemning, keeps insisting on one more step, one more condition, one more “self-sacrifice.” Luther said *“more than a thousand times I have vowed to God that I would improve, but I have never performed what I have vowed. Hereafter I shall not make such vows, because I know perfectly well I shall not live up to them. Unless God is gracious to me for the sake of Christ...I shall not be able to stand before him with all my vows and good works.”*

And as to forgiving someone – you can do so because you are forgiven. Far from excusing right and wrong, of ignoring the bite, Christians find our healing in the wounds of Jesus. His cross shows us how truly sinful sin is. But if Christ’s wounds have healed you ... whose sin put Him on his cross, can you do the same for one who has wounded you? You can, but not if God is your 18th step. If you start with Christ, if you lay before him that wound of yours, if you look to him confident he never takes his gaze off you, you will find you can forgive...you will know what it is to know a who God knows a thing or two about how to remedy pain.
AMEN