

"Forgiven by God"

Acts 13:26-41
March 7, 2010

Acts 5:29-32
St. James UCC

Preached by Rev. Dr. Robert Matlack

There's an old Hasidic tale about a Rabbi who once asked his pupils how they could tell when the night had ended and the day had begun.

"Could it be," asked one of the students, "when you see an animal in the distance and tell whether it is a sheep or a dog?"

"No," answered the Rabbi.

"Another asked, "Is it when you can look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it's a fig tree or a peach tree?"

"No," answered the Rabbi.

"Then, when is it?" the pupils demanded.

"It is when you can look on the face of any man or woman and see that it is your sister or brother. Because if you cannot see this, it is still night."

In the darkness of their despair over Jesus' crucifixion, the followers of the Jesus struggled to make sense out of what had happened. While Jesus had warned them many times that this was what must happen, they had closed their ears, because they were unwilling to hear, unwilling to believe. Now all of their hopes and expectations had come shattering down as Jesus' words had come true.

In the darkness of that despair there was a message that they heard. For in His sacrifice on the cross Jesus was reaching out to each one of them and to us, and calling us brother or sister. Even more, the darkness of night was lifted by the love of Christ/the love of God that reached out to each of them in the midst of their despair, turning the darkness into the light of hope.

It is in the book of Acts that we find a history of those early days of the church. There in our texts for this morning, we find several important statements about how they had come to make sense of Jesus' crucifixion and of course the glorious resurrection that followed. Our first text this morning says in part: "All of you, my fellow Israelites, are to know for sure that it is through Jesus that the message about forgiveness of sins is preached to you; you are to know that everyone who believes in him is set free from all the sins from which the Law of Moses could not set you free." Our second text goes even farther in naming this forgiveness of sins as the reason why Jesus' death and resurrection had to take place. It says: "God raised him to his right side as Leader and Savior, to give the people of Israel the opportunity to repent and have their sins forgiven."

We are in the midst of another journey through Lent, and as we move on through this time of preparation, let us focus on what it is that we are preparing for. This is a time for us to open our hearts, our minds and our innermost spirits to know that God has offered us a special gift, a gift that is far more valuable than any other that we have received or even thought about receiving. God has offered us the gift of forgiveness.

Think about it for a moment. Most of us try to be decent, honest, honorable people. There are a lot of nice people here today, in fact I suspect that very few gatherings of people for any purpose bring together such a nice decent group of people. I say that very sincerely, for that is how I know you.

Yet at the same time, we all know that there are far too many times when we fail to live up to our own expectations for ourselves. I'm thinking of the times when we've had a bad day and so we're angry at someone when it's really not their fault, or when we let someone have it because this is the 10th time someone has made this same mistake and we're upset about the other nine - even though this is the first time for this person, or the times when someone catches us by surprise and we react in a way that we wouldn't have if we'd taken some time to think about it. You can add your own examples to this list, but the point is that for each of us there are far too many times when we have made mistakes, when we have sinned by our actions against others.

We all know that however hard we try we can never quite make up for those wrongs that we have done. They bother us, because that's really not the kind of person that we are, and we'd like to take them back, we'd like to undo the mistakes that we've made, but we can't.

I might add that there are people whom we all know that never worry about things like that. They do far more wrong than we ever dream of, and it never seems to bother them. They are out of touch with their real nature. They have cut themselves off from their ability to love others, and so they wander through life hurting other people and never worrying about it. Their load of sin is much heavier than ours. They carry around a much bigger weight of wrongs that they have done. Yet as we know, the weight of our sin is plenty heavy enough. It weighs on us and we'd like to get rid of it, but we don't know how.

In the midst of that reality we are reminded that Jesus allowed himself to be crucified and then rose from the dead that we might not have to carry that weight around with us forever. For in His wondrous gift God has said to each of us, "I love you. I forgive you. I set you free from the weight of your sin." No longer do we have to lug that weight around, constantly being reminded of how bad we've been, and always feeling guilty. In Jesus Christ we have been set free.

With freedom always comes responsibility, and that takes us back to my example of people who do a great deal of wrong and never lose a bit of sleep over it. Jesus Christ has freed us - not to go out and keep making the same mistakes, not to go out and take advantage of people and abuse them. That is the old pattern of sinfulness. The people who accept the gift and are unchanged, are people who in their hearts have not discovered the freedom and the joy of God's love.

For when we really know God's love inside, then we are freed to live differently, to

live better. God makes it so that we don't have to keep making the same old mistakes. We don't have to see ourselves in the same way that we have, and we don't have to see each other the same way either. God frees us to live and to be different. God frees us to live and to be someone new, someone better, someone more faithful, someone more loving.

When you think about it, that's the best news of all. God offers us the gift of a second chance (or even a third or fourth or fifth if we need it). God knows us. God loves us, and God doesn't want us to go through life making the same old mistakes, so God has given us the chance to be different - and yes we still won't be perfect. We'll still make mistakes, but we can make new ones, instead of continuing to make the same old ones. And perhaps, in the process we can be a little better than we've been before. Perhaps we can be a little bit more faithful, a little bit more loving, a little bit more forgiving, because we know how important it is to be loved and forgiven.

For those of you who are tempted to say, "but I don't feel forgiven". God has given us some classic forgiveness promises that may speak to you:

In Jeremiah 31 God says, "I will forgive their sins and I will no longer remember their wrongs". This is the amnesia promise since God in effect says, "What was that sin you think I didn't forgive? I don't even remember it. It's done. It's gone.

In Isaiah 1 we have the stain removal promise where God says: "Now let's settle the matter. You are stained red with sin, but I will wash you as clean as snow. Although your stains are deep red, you will be as white as wool."

Then in Psalm 103 there's the East-West promise: "As far as the east is from the west so far does he remove our sins from us."

Finally in Micah 7 there's the deep sea promise: "You will trample our sins underfoot and send them to the bottom of the sea!"

So, when you're having trouble feeling forgiven, remember one of these promises, and then remember Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and how much God really loves each of us.

Amen.