

Sunday, March 20, 2022

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

Betrayal and Redemption -from Darkness to Light

Part 3: Guilt, Shame & Forgiveness

Luke 22:52-62 - John 21:15-17

PRAYER

Our Loving & Good God, as we read these stories of betrayal and redemption, help us to understand the power of Love, the light of compassion, the necessity of forgiveness, and the reliability of your redemption. As we wrestle with these timeless stories, open our hearts to help better understand our own lives in relationship to You and also one another. Guide our path as we walk from darkness to light. AMEN.

INTRODUCTION:

Today is part 3 of our Lenten series called, ***Betrayal and Redemption - from Darkness to Light***. Many of you involved in our small groups are discussing some of the classic stories from the Bible that deal with a variety of betrayals and continue through the injustice of it all, only to end up finding redemption in the most remarkable ways. The consistent theme we find in these sacred stories is that, the road leading from darkness to light, is always and only paved with mercy, understanding, grace and forgiveness.

No one sets out to betray someone. No one wants to be betrayed. But life events can often lead to betrayal, and generally speaking, the betrayer has come to believe that this action is not only justified, but also necessary. Betrayal is always a devastating event for both the betrayed and the betrayer. It is not unlike a murder. Once the action is taken, it can never be undone, and for those involved it can permanently alter the relationship and even the course of their entire life.

Today, and all week in our small group discussions, we will look at, what is for me, one of the most heartbreaking betrayals found in the Bible. It is the story of Jesus' disciple Peter, and his denial of Jesus, three times. Peter is perhaps the most well-known of the Twelve Disciples. You may remember that Jesus referred to Peter as the rock on which his church would be built. Yet, we also know him as the one Disciple who betrayed Jesus at his arrest.

Although this heartbreaking story is told in all four Gospels, let's read it from Luke's point-of-view found on page 87 in your pew Bibles. This is Luke, chapter 22:52-62.

We pick up the story on that infamous night just as the Chief Priests and temple police had hunted down Jesus and found him just outside Jerusalem, quietly praying with his disciples on the Mount of Olives. Luke writes...

SCRIPTURE: Luke 22:52-62

Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, "This man also was with him." But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, "Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean." But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

SERMON:***Betrayal and Redemption -from Darkness to Light - Part 3: Guilt, Shame & Forgiveness***

I think this story is so heartbreaking for me because I can immediately relate to being in Peter's shoes. It's the kind of betrayal you don't see coming. It really wasn't planned or thought out at all. It just happened and you have no excuse for it what-so-ever.

I remember in college I was friendly with a young guy named Sammy. Emerson has some kind of special program that allowed for this slightly developmentally disabled young man to be mainstreamed into college life. Sammy lived in the dorm where I was an R.A. and I knew him and liked him quite a bit. But it wasn't easy for him there. He was socially awkward and, shall I say, hygienically challenged. Yet, a nicer guy you will never meet.

Anyway, one day I was riding the elevator down with some other kids who were ripping on Sammy. We could all tell he had just been in the elevator himself. I shook my head and said to the group. "I think Sammy would have more friends if he would just clean himself up. It's disgusting."

The elevator doors opened and there, standing right at the door was Sammy, staring right at me. Clearly, he heard what I had just said and quickly brushed by me without a word, got in the elevator and shut the door. What a horrible moment that was for me.

Like Peter, in a sudden flash I felt the whole weight of my failure. I was guilty and without excuse. For Peter, it was just a few hours ago that he wanted to physically fight the police to stop Jesus from being arrested. Now his courage had melted into confusion. He had been totally blindsided by what was happening and completely disheartened and probably even angry when Jesus refused to take up a righteous assault against the temple guards. Like the elevator door opening, Peter came eye-to-eye with his friend. He hears a crowing rooster in the distance and is stunned by the shocking realization: **He had betrayed the one he loved** just as Jesus had foretold.

Hold that tension now as we jump-cut to a few *wild* days later. Disoriented and confused by the defeat and death of Jesus, Peter and the others return to what they know. They go fishing. Suddenly, as the day breaks, he unmistakably sees Jesus on the beach! We pick up the story on page 116. This is how the Gospel of John records what must have been an awkward encounter for Peter and his unresolved guilt and shame. Here is how John tells it, beginning in chapter 21 verses 15 through 17...

SCRIPTURE: John 21:15-17

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep.

There is so very much to unpack in this scene, and I hope you do in your groups this week. But this morning I want to focus on what I think is the absolute defining feature

of all Christian Theology. Any guesses? I'll bet that many Christians would say that love is the most distinctive aspect of our faith, or maybe the idea of justice; but love and justice, can never be fulfilled until the hard and terrible wall of forgiveness has been confronted and climbed. Forgiveness is the bolt-cutter that breaks the bonds of guilt and shame. It is the only way of liberation both for the offended and the offender.

I have preached a lot about the primacy of forgiveness because it is so foundational. In fact, our very own Lord's Prayer points out a strange paradox. "Forgive us our sins, debts, mistakes, wrong-headedness, shame, guilt and resentments the way we forgive those who sin against us." Oddly enough, it seems that forgiveness is the only conditional component of the Christian faith. It is so exclusively defining of Christianity. I know of no other religion that categorically demands that we forgive others in order to be forgiven. The paradox is that God's love is unconditional - always & everywhere - but we MUST forgive 70 X 7 in order to have the fullness of a sustaining relationship with God and also with one another.

It seems to me that most of the interpersonal difficulties that we encounter all stem from unresolved grief, lingering guilt, and unexplored shame. We have very limited understanding of how to either forgive or be forgiven. It's a concept so critical and yet so unpracticed, mostly I think because we aren't taught about it. We don't have a "toolkit" for it and tend to never really know how to resolve the hurts we have received or given out to others.

As a culture we really don't know how to access the sermon on the mount even though nearly everyone thinks they are nice words Jesus came up with that day. But I believe it's critical for any practicing Christian to really work hard to understand, access and practice forgiveness as often as possible. Jesus simply takes Peter aside and moves past the betrayal, cutting right to the heart of the matter. "Do you love me?"

I believe that the best way to understand the depth of God's love is to first understand God's enormous capacity to forgive, and what forgiveness costs. Therein comes the rub. Jesus went around forgiving people all the time, freeing them from the guilt of their behavior and releasing them from the shame that they thought

defined them. Jesus ministry of liberating forgiveness is exactly what got him killed! People don't take kindly to unfettered grace. People want law and order, retribution and revenge. Then maybe I'll consider forgiveness. Yet, it appears to me that it is only the broken person, confronted with their own sense of failure, weakness and culpability beyond defense, that can really understand God's forgiveness and thereby dispense it with the same wild abandon. In most of the main line denominations we tend to think we're all pretty good people overall, and I think that is also true, but, that also creates an inability to find our true confession or see the reality of our culpability. Avoiding our shadow self and denying the unresolved regrets will actually dilute our understanding of the great essential power of forgiveness.

What we learn from Peter is that the first-hand experience of interpersonal forgiveness is inextricably linked to understanding the enormity and cost of God's forgiveness. "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those to sin against us."

I caught up with Sammy later that evening. I told him how sorry I was and that should not have ever said that. I had no right to cast judgement on him. I will never forget what he said to me. "Of course, I forgive you! Everyone makes mistakes. We're fine." Here I was, face to face with Jesus who looked and acted exactly like my friend Sammy. You are forgiven, let us begin again.

I want to end today I did last week when I was talking about the story of Joseph and his enormous - game-changing, history-shifting, healing when he finally found a way to utterly and completely forgive his brothers. We are all faced with choices about how we behave. Part of us wants revenge, an eye for an eye, punitive justice even while what we are ALL really looking for is redemption, resolution and restoration. Along our journey from darkness to light we do have choices to make, and if we learn anything from these stories in scripture it is that mercy, grace and forgiveness is the only path that will lead us from betrayal to redemption. As Martin Luther King once said, "Forgiveness is NOT an occasional act, it is a constant attitude." It may seem counter-intuitive but choosing this constant attitude of forgiveness is certainly reflecting the constant attitude of God. Let us never forget the crucial primacy of forgiveness as we continue along our own Lenten journey from darkness to light. - AMEN