

The Power of Forgiveness

9:00 a.m., December 13, 2009

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Canticle 9; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:3-18

Trinity Episcopal Church, Aurora, IL

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Open our hearts, Lord, to your grace and salvation. In your Holy Name. Amen.

Please be seated.

Good morning!

The word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness; and he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As he anticipated and taught the people to wait for the coming of the Messiah, that anointed one called the Christ, who would save the people, John the Baptist preached that people turn away from their selfish and self-seeking ways, turning back to God that they might be forgiven. In today's Gospel lesson, John instructs the crowds, and members of two particularly ungodly group, tax collectors and soldiers, men who were either collaborating with the enemy or actual members of the enemy itself – the Roman Empire, which was occupying the Promised Land. These groups were the most despised – they were considered to be the furthest from God – for they were known to prey upon God's people. (In this short lesson, we have representatives of the full spectrum of humanity, from your average Joe to the worst of the worst.) John's teaching reminds them of just what each of them might do – whether they were a member of the community, or a member of one of these vilified groups – to live according to God's commandments rather than their own selfish and greedy ways.

Why, then should these people change their ways? Why should they bother living differently? Make different choices? John calls upon them to "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." He tasks them with a life that produces physical manifestations of having turned back to God. Why? So that they might be forgiven by God. Forgiven of their selfish choices, their cruel acts, the needless hurts they have inflicted upon each other, the countless ways people are cold, indifferent, or insensitive to each other. God's chosen vessel is coming, Christ is coming, Judgment is coming, so get ready.

This may seem far removed from us. John here strikes a pose that for ages was captured in cartoons of old men with long beards holding signs that shout "Repent. The end is near!" Not surprisingly, this stock figure has a cameo role in the new end-of-the-world disaster movie, *2012*. For many Christians, today, I suspect this ancient Christian doctrine of the end times has been corrupted by charlatans and mad men, so that it's hard for some of us to give much credence, to give much of our hearts to this notion of a God, sitting in judgment, casting any of the beloved creatures of God into what John calls the "unquenchable fire."

I don't know where you sit with this. Our church has never been big on fire and brimstone preaching, and I don't intend to start today. And, yet, let's be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. What's underneath all of the fiery rhetoric? Really, what John's preaching is that the people can be – need to be – restored to God, by being restored to one another. That, my friends, is the mission of the Church, according to the Book of Common

Prayer, page 855. Really what John's preaching is about is reconciling the people – us – to God. Restoring the people, us, back into God's good graces. Healing the wounds of broken relationship. That we, like the prodigal son, might be forgiven of our God, our Father in Heaven.

What does it mean to be forgiven? Well, when we know we are guilty of something, don't we sometimes hide our shame in dark places, that the truth of our guilt might not be exposed? What might it feel like to be free from the chains of guilt that keep us from seeking the light?

One Christian group holds out these promises, for those who would do the work: "We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness." That sounds pretty good, doesn't it? "We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it." In your past, have you done things you wish you hadn't – that you regret? Do you have memories that when brought to mind, actually make you shudder? What would it be like to be free of that self-loathing, that disgust? "We will," the book continues, "know peace."¹

Do you know peace?

In these hard times, when so little seems sure, when the things we used to take for granted – like a decent paying job, clean air and water, political stability in our country, a better future for our children, as long as we worked enough, when so much of what was guaranteed seems to be slipping through our fingers, what value might you put on peace of mind? Not peace of mind that comes from something temporary, not peace of mind that comes from the distractions of escapism, but real, lasting peace of mind that resonates from deep within you.

Peace with the past. Peace with oneself. A new happiness. A new freedom. These are hallmarks of the spiritual journey. The path begins when we remember that there is a God, and we are not him. It unfolds as we ask forgiveness for our clumsy, selfish, hurtful ways, and we are forgiven.

In preparation for meeting our God at the altar, as we await his coming to us in the sacrament of Holy Communion, we say together the General Confession. We confess our shortcomings and our unloving choices to a God who will hear them when they are offered honestly, from an open and contrite heart.

Perhaps this sounds hard. And still, something deep inside each and everyone of us, yearns for connection with God. If we invest that yearning, that compelling, honest, integrity of desire in our confession, the Holy Spirit notices. If we are willing and honest, we may be astonished at the results. Scripture tells us, again and again and again, how much God yearns for that connection, too. The experience of the people of God is consistent throughout the ages. God can and will forgive us. As we heard in the first reading from Zephaniah, "The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, . . . he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love." And again, "I will change their shame into praise . . . I will bring you home."

In the First Song of Isaiah, we heard, "Surely, it is God who saves me; I will trust in him and not be afraid." In the Letter to the Church in Philippi, Paul writes that when we are

¹ *Alcoholics Anonymous*. Third Edition. New York City, AA World Services, Inc., 1976, pp. 83-84.

restored to God, “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Again. And Again. And Again. We rest peacefully, we are happy (Rejoice!), and we are free, when we get right with God.

So, after the creed and the prayers of the people, we enter into the general confession. There is a brief pause, a moment of silence, between the invitation and the confession itself. I invite you to use this time to bring to mind any poor decisions you may have made, any selfish choices that cost others, any hurts you may have caused intentionally or unintentionally, any moments that make you shudder to remember. Bring them to mind and offer them to God freely. Ask God to take them. Ask God to forgive you. Honestly. Passionately. Without reservation. Give yourself over to the prayer. And then, see what happens. I am convinced that there is deep truth to the old saying, Confession is good for the soul.

Sometimes, particularly with wrongs that have become deep and hardened, it's necessary to say our confession to God, outloud in front of another human being. When that's the case, I'm always available to meet with you. In fact, any Christian can hear another's confession. Sometimes it helps to know that the person you're speaking to is bound by an oath of confidentiality. Whether you choose to share your story with a clergy person or a lay person, personal confession can open doors to God, that may seem closed.

Meanwhile, I invite you, this morning, as a beginning, to use the time of the general confession with all the integrity, all the heart, and all the vigor you can muster. Really put yourself into it. Use it. As words on a page, or rote recitation without life, it's pretty meaningless. With our hearts engaged, it can change our lives.

Now, let us pray. Dear God in heaven, burst open our hearts, that we might offer ourselves to you – the good and the bad – freely, willingly, joyfully. Remove from us every single defect of character that stands in the way of our usefulness to you and our fellows. Grant us strength, as we go out from here, to do your will.² In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

² *Ibid.*, p. 76, paraphrased.