

Words Forming Witnesses

Psalm 96 & Hosea 14:1-2
(Hymns – 350, 815, 530, 563)
June 2, 2013

Forgiveness Frees the Good

It's a powerful parallel with which Hosea confronts us.

The relationship between God and his people
is like an unfaithful spouse who is forgiven and welcomed back.

Hosea models this in his own life
and uses it as his dominant image for the nature and work of God.
Israel has been unfaithful, following other gods.
God seeks them out, forgives them, and welcomes them back
into the intimate relationship of salvation.
Indeed, that's what Hosea's name means in Hebrew –
salvation – he saves or he helps.

He lived in the Northern Kingdom from 780-725BC.
Beneath his warnings of doom
lay the promise of restoration
through forgiveness and reconciliation.

In our verses to memorize and ponder this week,
Hosea suggests words of acknowledgement and gratitude
that Israel might use as it returns to this forgiving, loving God,
words that will heal their disloyalty
and open them yet again to the freedom they enjoy in God's company.
The rest of chapter 14 is a powerful poetic portrayal
of the flourishing beauty of a life lived with God.

*I will be like the dew to Israel;
He shall blossom like the lily,
he shall strike root like the forests of Lebanon.
his roots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive tree,
and his fragrance like that of Lebanon.
They shall again live beneath my shadow,
they shall flourish as a garden.*
(Hosea 14:5-7a)

And here's how I unpack the memorize and ponder verse for this week.

When, with the help of the Holy Spirit,
we acknowledge our faithlessness and idolatry,
we return to the Lord admitting this honestly
and offer God our lives in service
to the fruits of the Spirit –
love, joy, peace,
patience, kindness, generosity,
faithfulness, gentleness, and self-discipline.

That list of the results or products of the Spirit's work in us,
as you will remember,
is from Paul's letter to the Galatians,
his eloquent treatise of Christian freedom.
In Jesus Christ, God frees us to be good.
That goodness, Paul reminds us in Galatians 5:13-14,
is at the core of God's call to freedom in Jesus Christ.

*For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters;
Only do not use your freedom
as an opportunity for self-indulgence,
but through love become slaves to one another.
For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment,
"You shall love your neighbour as yourself."*

As a side-note, it is important to understand
the connotation of the Greek word used for "slave" in this passage.
It points to dependence on a lord or master
rather than the social position of being a slave.
God is looking for dependence and loyalty,
not the servility and denial of human dignity
often associated with the word.

So, forgiveness frees the good
that God has sown within us
to be active and influential in the world.

It begins with God's forgiveness of us,
a forgiveness that is at the very core of the Biblical witness.
We turn away from God,
seek satisfaction in other loyalties,
discover their barrenness,
are drawn back to God by the loving work of the Holy Spirit,
and are welcomed home unconditionally
so we can be the blessings God created us to be.



There are two powerful contemporary illustrations of these truths worth remembering.

The first is what has happened in South Africa in relationship to the idolatry and faithlessness of apartheid.

The second is what is happening in Canada in relationship to the idolatry and faithlessness of our attitudes and behaviours towards the First Nations of this country, especially in residential schools which were often run by the churches.

It was announced in April this year that Desmond Tutu, retired Anglican archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, was awarded the 2013 Templeton Prize for his work in developing and disseminating the spiritual principles of forgiveness.

In awarding the \$1.7 million prize, the foundation said this:

By embracing such universal concepts as the image of God within each person, Desmond Tutu also demonstrates how the innate humanity within each of us is intrinsically tied to the humanity between all peoples.

Desmond Tutu call upon all of us to recognize that each and every human being is unique in all of history, and, in doing so, to embrace our own vast potential to be agents for spiritual progress and positive change. Not only does he teach this idea, he lives it.

Tutu was a central figure in designing and implementing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa that sought to tell the truth in the context of forgiveness.

That same principle of forgiveness freeing the good informs the work of the Healing and Reconciliation Commission here in Canada.

It is currently touring the country holding hearings in various centres. It will be in Vancouver this September.

Here are some of the words from our own church's apology to the First Nations of Canada issued in 1994:

The Church said of our Aboriginal brothers and sisters, "If they could be like us, if they could think like us, talk like us, worship like us, sing like us, and work like us, they would know God and therefore would have life abundant." In our cultural arrogance we have been blind to the ways in which our own understanding of the Gospel has been culturally conditioned, and because of our insensitivity to Aboriginal cultures, we have demanded more of the Aboriginal people than the Gospel requires, and have thus misrepresented Jesus Christ who loves all peoples with compassionate, suffering love that all may come to God through him. For the Church's presumption we ask forgiveness.

Wikipedia lists 27 countries that have had or currently have Truth and Reconciliation Commissions to deal with the denial of basic human rights in their histories. All work on the core principle of our text this morning – forgiveness, as the context for honest confession, frees the good.

That's why the unconditionality of God's love is so important in our Christian witness.

It frees us to be honest, to repent, and to reform.

Without fear of punishment, we are freed to admit the faults that prevent us from flourishing as God intends.

We are freed to continue to grow into the beautiful creatures God intends.

Fear not, then, God's unconditional love is within us,
and around us, and flowing through us,
and in all others that we meet,
so that we are all forgiven and freed to be good with and for each other.

Thanks be to God for such amazing grace.

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