

Searched by the Psalms Series at Brentwood

March 14, 2010

The Blessing of Forgiveness

Ps 32 & Luke 15:11-32

(Hymns – 119, 17, 760,747)

Both passages we read from the Scriptures this morning
are deeply troubling.
They are deeply troubling because of what they say about sin.
What they say about our sin is that we are forgiven.
God does not hold it against us.
God has covered it over,
overcome its power,
considered its impact done and gone,
reconciled us to the loving community of the Holy Trinity
and all who are embraced by its delight in forgiveness.

The good news of the Gospel in these passages
is the blessing of forgiveness.
It is the removal,
the complete removal,
of the burden and weight of sin.
The images in the Scriptures are powerful.
We are washed clean,
restored to relationships,
freed from the bonds of the past,
a new humanity,
not because of what we have done,
but because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

There are a couple of things worthy of particular note
in being grasped by and comprehending
the significance of this good news.

First, these stories are not primarily about the sin or the sinner.
They are about God's forgiveness
and the impact that has on the whole community
in which the person lives.
They are about the impact the blessing of forgiveness
has on the person, on those around the person,
and the person's relationship with God.

We often call the passage we read from Luke this morning
“the parable of the prodigal son.”

But the son’s actions, sinful as they are,
are only the prologue or setup
for the father’s actions.

Someone, I think it might have been Henri Nouwen
in his wonderful study of this parable called
The Return of the Prodigal,
suggested we rename it
“the parable of the profligate father.”

I remember that title sending me off to my dictionary
to find out exactly what ‘profligate’ meant.

It’s a powerful word.
As Nouwen was using it,
it means “recklessly extravagant,”
and “rashly generous”
is the father’s loving forgiveness.

So, these passages are about
how God has chosen to deal with our sin
and what the response of human beings can be
when they are grasped and enfolded by that good news.
God has chosen to forgive
and human beings are invited to celebrate,
to praise, give thanks, and throw a party.

Let’s take a minute here to remind ourselves
of how the Bible and the Christian tradition understands sin.
If the summary of all the law and the prophets
is simply love God, love neighbour, and love yourself
with all your energy,
body, mind, heart, and soul,
then any failure to focus your complete attention
on that breath and depth of love
is sin.

Given that understanding of sin,
we are all separated from God, each other, and ourselves.

That separation is sin.
All that is wrong in this world
flows in some way, shape, and form
from these fundamental separations.

Luke captures the dynamic of realizing the cost of sin
with 5 simply but powerful words –
“when he came to himself.”

God has created us in such a way
that we know at some level
when we are out of alignment,
out of sorts,
distracted and disconnected.
We do not feel we are truly ourselves.
And that is because we are not focused
on the discipline of loving God, neighbour, and self
in an integrated way,
in a way that blends the gifts of the Spirit –
love, joy, peace, patience,
kindness, generosity, faithfulness,
gentleness, and self-discipline –
so that we are truly a blessing.

You see, the blessing of forgiveness
that these passages celebrate
is not just for us.
It is given to us so that it can flow through us.
It delights God and it benefits others.
And through these blessings, we experience deep blessing within ourselves.

Think of what the writer of the Psalm does
with the forgiveness God has given.
He takes it out into the community at worship,
into the community gathered to remember and praise God
for all that God has done for them.
He shares his joy with others
at the steadfast love that surrounds those who trust in the Lord.

There are many sermons in these two passages,
but I think we've covered enough in this one.
The good news is that we are forgiven by God,
reconciled with God, others and our true selves,
simply because God has chosen to do that.
Because of that grace, we are continually renewed in our strength
to be a blessing to all that we meet.
And that is cause for a party, for shouts of joy and gladness.

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