

Grace, Gratitude, and a Gentle Savior

Lessons: Galatians 2:15-21, LUKE 7:41-50

There is an interesting trend in the last 50 years in modern worship – and I don't mean musical styles or the no dress-up norm. The trend has been happening since the 1950's. Worship has become a place for spiritual pep-rallies or self-help sermons, or positive thinking reinforcement or – worst of all, some pretty slick sermon that is easy to understand, has nice illustrations, sounds intellectual and erudite, and does not say much of anything controversial or personal.

I remember my first wake-up call to the impact of this trend when I went to a Presbyterian church as a pastor 20 years ago. I had been there about 4 months when one of the “core members” wanted to talk with me about worship. She was disturbed about how dark the prayers of confession were. “The prayers of confession are heavy on the sin. But we are good people. We like the prayers that are more encouraging and tell how God will help us.”

The gospel lesson today is about an event that happened every day in Jesus' ministry. Forgiving people their sins and giving them new life was Jesus' ministry. The point of the healing miracles was the physical sign that their spiritual lives were changed. The point of his judgments against the self-righteous was that they needed forgiveness.

I don't know about you, but I come to worship for the forgiveness – the reminder that I am a forgiven sinner, and God has given me a grace I don't deserve to help me live a life I could not live without God's mercy. I hear the “Words of Assurance” that God is still changing me, and I am filled with gratitude to live another week and work on my sins.

So today the sermon is summed up in Words of Assurance: “Hear the good news. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven! We give thanks to God.” In most Presbyterian churches these days, those words are responsive words from the congregation. Let's try it: ...

Minister: Here the Good News! In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven!

People: We give thanks to God!

Jesus always took sin seriously, and recognized that people are sinners. In fact, his times with the sinners went a lot better and easier than his encounters with the people who considered themselves the “good people.” Jesus did not wait until they had confessed before he had supper with them. There was something about Jesus that made sinners want to get close. They climbed trees and pulled up roofs to be near him. They just wanted to touch the hem of his robe, or they gathered in crowds on the hillside. Why?

...because he was the person who showed them how God dealt with sinners. They had sung Hymn #103 in the Psalms” “He does not deal with us according to our sins, or repay us according to our iniquities.” Jesus did not come condemning; he came to save. He looked at their sin, and looked through their sin. He saw who people could be in God's power, and he said there was enough mercy in God to forgive the sins of everybody in the whole cosmos – no matter how much they owed.

“Mercy” – it’s not a word we hear much, even in church. Mercy means not giving people what they deserve, not treating people the way they have treated us. Mercy means looking for the goodness, helping sinners live to the goodness so that it become the power in their lives to overcome of their sin.

All those looking to Jesus recognized their sin and sorry-ness. They asked for forgiveness from the One who recognized their good-ness in spite of their sin and forgave them. In the accounts of Jesus’ forgiveness, the thing these people shared was their awareness of their helplessness against the power of sin. They cried “Lord, have mercy!” and they got it. It never left them, and they were so grateful that they could live in that greater power of amazing grace. Christ living in them was stronger than the sin living in them! The assurance of forgiveness caused them to live in gratitude.

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“We give thanks to God.” People who thought they had a lot of sins to lose also thought they had gained a lot because of Christ’s grace. Their lives changed. They no longer lived in the guilt of their sins. They lived in thankfulness for forgiveness. They still saw themselves as “sorry sinners” who regretted their evil. But they were so thankful for Christ’s love that they spent time trying to make up for their past – repaying their debt to someone they had wronged, telling people that God had changed their lives when they had lost hope they could ever change, or changing the direction of their work so that they could serve God and keep away from sin.

The gospel is that God loves us the way we are, and tells us we can do better. They knew that genuine gratitude was not saying “I’m sorry” or “I’m forgiven” and then staying the same. They made every effort in their living to work on their bad habits, their wrong motives, their evil, their sin. It was their different way of living that showed their different gratitude. They had obtained mercy. They were full of mercy no how much they gave.

The strength in church is the strength in all of us. Some of you are pretty public sinners, and some of you are secret sinners. But you are people who come for the forgiveness and are trying to overcome the guilt and burden and power of some sin in your lives. Worship is the place where we work on our sins. We come because we are sinners, we receive forgiveness, and we tell God we need help to be different so that we don’t have to confess the same sin next week. We ask God’s help, and we go to work on our sins. We use the power of gratitude to overcome the debilitating power of sin’s inertia that keeps us helpless and guilty. “Well, I’m just a sinner. I can’t do anything about it.” “Of course, you can’t. So what?” Christ can do something about it, so work with Christ and work on your sin. Get over it! You and Christ can get over it.”

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There are people – even in worship – who do not think they are the sinners. They are generally quick to point out other people’s sins. The cynics of Jesus’ day said the sinners were just coming for the miracles – to get the food or the healing. The good people looked down on the lesser people to make themselves feel better about themselves. They did not like Jesus because he did not treat them differently, make them feel better than the bad people. They were

so in denial of their need for forgiveness that they judged Jesus, and crucified him! How dare he let these people off the hook! They need to pay – and keep paying, and never stop paying – for what they have done. What reward do we get for being good if the bad people get their debts canceled? How do we know we are the good people if the bad people aren't treated badly? – if we can't treat them badly?

The weakness in worship is the weakness in all of us. Why is it that church is a place where we think we can treat people badly? We think that gives us permission to show our bad behaviors, and people are supposed to forgive us and just take it. How is it that we can say mean things to people, or say ugly things about people to other people, or shun some people, or exclude some people? Paul did a better job than most anyone after Jesus of living mercy, and he was quick to admit he was the worst sinner. Why can't we say we are as bad as anyone? Why can't we look each other in the eye and say we are no better than any other person in this room? Why can't we say to each other, "I'm a sinner. I have sinned against you."

It's a contradiction in grace to me that people in the church keep dealing with sinners as sinners, when we come here because God does not deal with any of us sinners according to our sins. Every week we pray we pray what Jesus taught us. "Forgive our sins as we forgive others." There is no comma there. How dare us ask for forgiveness when we have not forgiven. Why is it that we are not willing to give to someone else in our own congregation the mercy we have received from God? Freely we have received. Why is it that we ask God for mercy, but we are not willing to show mercy?

Just ask Mark Schmidt, "How are you?" and what answer do you always hear? "...couldn't be better." All seven months, my reply has been, "Yes, you could." We can all be better! We can all show our gratitude for Christ's mercy by being better. So why don't we live mercy better with each other? Why don't we model mercy, make this a mercy place? If we affirm that we are all forgiven in Jesus Christ, why can't we live the forgiveness with every one of us? Remember? Gratitude for God's forgiveness is in the giving of God's mercy to others.

Minister: Here the Good News! In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven!

People: We give thanks to God! by forgiving each other.

I am thankful for grace, but I am big on the mercy. I don't know what your sin is, and truthfully, I really don't care! I do not see a reason to deal with any of you according to your sin. I've got a more-than-full time job working on my own sins, and I try best I can to work on them by focusing on my gratitude and living the mercy I have received. My pastor job is to put Christ in front of you, show you his mercy, show you his different way, and remind you that you are forgiven and you can live like him. Nobody gets a pass on working on our sins, because everybody gets the mercy.

I first learned mercy in worship – worship in a different kind of sanctuary. Every second Sunday afternoon of the month a small group from Chatham Baptist Church took their families out to the County Prison farm. It was a minimum security prison, petty crimes and hard lives. They grew vegetables in season, and they worked on the road crews. They had a beat up piano and worn out hymnals they didn't need. They knew a lot of songs by heart, and they would call out a song and sing. We would sit in a circle, and we always mixed the seats so that each of us was sitting next to an inmate. I would read a scripture and we would talk about it. They would say what they heard, and I learned some amazing truths of how mercy works. They saw

themselves as 500 denari sinners, and Jesus had forgiven their debt. We would pray, and I would ask for prayer requests. Month after month, the thanksgivings outnumbered the askings, and I came to realize why. They knew they were sinners, they were trying to change. They needed the mercy – and they were grateful and glad to get it.

Their closing hymn was the same song every time. They knew it by heart. They sang it like a prayer.

Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior. Hear my humble cry.
Trusting only in your merit, I would seek your face;
Heal my wounded, broken spirit, Save me by your grace.

We are all “sorry sinners,” wounded and broken and not able to help ourselves. We have all received the mercy of a Savior who loves us anyway. With gratitude, let us give to every sorry sinner we know – no better or worse than us – the mercy we have received.