

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for October 9, 2011
Lessons: Exodus 32:1-14 and Luke 23:33-38

GOD'S PURPOSE

What could be more important to the gospel of Jesus Christ than forgiveness? It is God's answer to the human problem, God's way of fixing what is broken and putting life back on course. When Jesus offered people forgiveness, his critics objected, not only because they thought he was usurping the authority of God to grant or withhold mercy, but also because they believed he was forgiving the wrong people. To them, forgiveness was acceptable only as leniency for those who were trying hard to live up to God's standards. In their view, God overlooked the momentary lapses in virtue they realized could plague even the most faithful of commandment keepers. After all, if God were too strict, no one could be righteous; everyone would fail and be lost. Jesus' critics, the legalists, equated forgiving with excusing based upon merit. The truly virtuous, they believed, earned the occasional excuse from God for their inevitable human shortcomings and weaknesses of the flesh.

My professor for creative writing courses was very strict about the rules in her classes and ruthless with her red pen. I had done well in the intermediate course (and loved it), and I had earned an "A" on my first short story in the advanced course. The week we were finishing our second stories, I got the flu. I could not concentrate on my writing, and it came down to the last night before the story was due. My eyes literally went out of focus, and I could no longer work. So I set my alarm clock for the very early morning and went to bed. When I awakened, it was late morning, the class had already started, and my alarm clock was smashed. I handed in the story a day late, expecting an "F" if not a zero. The professor returned my story with a "B" and very few red-ink comments, which meant she did not consider it worth rewriting. Why did I get a "B" on a short story so poor that when I reread it I was ashamed? I never told her about the flu, but I suspect she knew something had gone wrong, and I guess she decided not to allow the lapse to keep me from going forward with creative writing if I so chose. I see some fairness in her giving me another chance to prove myself considering what happened, but I also see that the unmerited "B" represents the very kind of forgiveness that was acceptable to Jesus' critics. It was leniency within the context of merit, the break given to the person who has been trying hard and doing well but has slipped. To the legalistic mind, forgiveness is appropriate for those who have earned it.

What we human beings struggle to realize and often try very hard not to realize, is that the people doing well have already received considerable advantage. As I saw it, creative

writing did not come easily for me. I had to work, but the truth is that writing has always seemed natural to me and often fun. Suppose I had been dyslexic. Would that perceptual problem have made me any less intelligent or creative? No, but it probably would have taken away the leniency that gave me the unearned “B” on that dreadful short story. I would not have appeared so worthy of the break on the grade because I would have been a “struggling student,” which often is regarded as meaning one who is deficient, defective, difficult – in short, unworthy. But I would have been the same person, only with a perceptual problem! No matter, our judgments in this world are harsh because we see life as a competition in which the winners are the better people. We are incredibly unjust, and too often those who succeed in their endeavors congratulate themselves into the blindness of imagining they prospered all by themselves, by their own efforts and merits, when, in fact, they climbed up upon the efforts of many people and enjoyed privileges and opportunities a democratic society provides through its publicly supported institutions. I happened to have gone to good public schools. How virtuous of me. I had parents who loved me and cared about me. How very meritorious of me to have chosen such parents. I had some measure of talent for writing and a mother who encouraged it. How commendable of me. I guess I chose my childhood pretty well. Does any of that make sense? No, of course not, but we use just such illogic to judge people, then praise or blame them.

Now, let’s translate the school story into life’s more religious-sounding questions of blame and forgiveness. As crucial as it is to the gospel of Jesus Christ and all that salvation means, forgiveness is badly misunderstood even among Christians. Let me say what forgiveness *is not*. It is not excuse making. It is not a policy of tolerance or permissiveness. It is not just a second chance offered people who never really got their first chance. It is not condescending pity for someone considered deficient. It is not pardon granted by authority without any remorse from or hope for the offender. It is not an expunging of the record to make it appear as though the offense never happened. And forgiveness is not an objective matter that waves punishment without healing the offender or the victims. I suspect I have just negated most of what people think forgiveness is. Of course, I don’t have the power to enforce such negations; neither did Jesus. As hard as he tried, he could not get his legalistic opponents to see forgiveness for what it really was, and to the extent they did understand what he was talking about, they despised both his forgiveness and Jesus himself.

For the legalistic mind, God’s purpose is to reward the virtuous and punish the wicked, and the legalistic view of what constitutes wickedness is often shot through with disgust at particular types of people, regardless of what they actually do in their lives. This judgment by disgust is, certainly, the underlying message of the novel, *Wicked*, which creates its title character from L. Frank Baum’s wicked witch of the west in *The Wizard of Oz*. The witch is wicked from birth because of who she is, long before she may or may not be wicked

because of anything she has done. It belonged to the world-view of Jesus' opponents to judge people with disgust at who they were, and such judgment with disgust persists today.

If truly it is not God's purpose to reward the virtuous and punish the wicked, as Jesus insisted it was not, then what is God's purpose in dealing with individual human beings and with humanity as a whole? I include "humanity as a whole" because for the Bible, life is relational and communal. The people are an entity that has shared and interactive life, never just a collection of unrelated individuals. No one stands before God without his or her neighbors in life. There is no human life that is just individual. Biblically, alienation is the very nature of sin.

Forgiveness takes action to restore broken relationships – to heal them and make them whole – and only so can the individual also be healed. Jesus achieved God's purpose through the dynamics of forgiveness. What motivates his forgiveness? The answer is not tolerance which is a cold concept, often laden with disgust. We tolerate flies and mosquitoes until they bother us too much. No, forgiveness is motivated by compassion, which enters into the suffering and struggle of the other person, and it is motivated by respect for God's image in that other person and God's urgent desire for the healing of the broken relationship and restoration of community. In the biblical way of thinking, the person in need of forgiveness is like the arm or leg that has been badly cut by a blade. If my leg is bleeding, I am bleeding. I don't stop the blood flow, clean and disinfect the wound, then bandage it just for the sake of my leg but for the sake of my whole body. When our children in the community are joining gangs as their one way to pride and a sense of competence, we are bleeding. "Not my children," we say, "but theirs." That is the voice of sin, because sin is alienation from God, from other people, and from the human community. It is denial of relationship.

Moses refuses the tempting offer to accept God's judgment upon the idolatrous people and go on with God by himself to the promised land and become the father of God's people after the idolaters have been destroyed. Moses refuses, which, of course, is what God wants him to do; his standing with the people, at his own peril, makes him God's faithful servant. To that role of servant, Jesus Christ calls us, his church.

God's purpose is not to reward the deserving and punish the undeserving. God's purpose is to restore the human community, heal the wounded and broken, and bring home the lost and rebellious. For that purpose Jesus came, and for that purpose he lived, taught, and gave himself to suffering, humiliation, and death for us. Forgiveness is not a matter of wiping the slate clean but of healing and restoration. It is the power of God at work for human salvation. Amen.