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February 4, 2024

Scripture: Romans 7: 14- 8: 6

Sermon Title: Forgiving Grace

Prayer...

Introduction:

Last Sunday I began a three-part reflection on the topic of grace. I

shared about original grace, which is the idea that in the beginning God-

The Holy Trinity, which includes Christ himself created the world good

and that therefore what is deepest in all creation is the sacred divine

presence. Grace is understood as God's unmerited favor or God's active

love and mercy and grace is a gift given to all creation. Therefore, what

is deepest in us is grace. What is deepest in us is the divine presence of

Christ himself. The light shines in every person and all of creation and

the darkness has not overcome that light that is in the world and in us.

Today I want to talk about forgiving grace, which is the understanding of

grace that is more familiar to us. It is the idea that grace is the gift of

forgiveness from God. We do not earn this grace. Rather God gives forgiveness to us freely as we humble ourselves and confess our sin. Although I believe in original grace also known as original goodness, original love, and original blessing, I do believe that sin is part of the condition of humanity. I remember in my early twenties attending Bethany Presbyterian church in Seattle where my dad was a pastor. On one Sunday a woman liturgist was about to share the prayer of confession in our worship service and she paused and said something like, "A lot of churches these days shy away from the topic of sin, but not us Presbyterians. We are not afraid of the word sin. No, we acknowledge our sin and confess our sins before God."

I thought to myself, that is pretty cool. She is wise. Maybe, we Presbyterians got something right and our prayer of confession shows we take sin seriously. In the Presbyterian tradition, which is part of the reformed tradition of the church that was born after the Protestant Reformation, we reflect theologically on the idea that sin is a problem

deeply connected to our human condition. But also that the good news is that Jesus understands the human condition of sin, which is why he in some mysterious way, which we call the atonement, was able to take upon himself the sins of the world, die on the cross, rise from the dead and ultimately defeat the power of sin. The whole idea that one day we will join Jesus in heaven is connected to Christ's defeat of sin and the power of his grace and forgiveness. I prefer the term sinful condition to sinful nature. Sinful nature for some suggests what is deepest in us is sin. I believe what is deepest in us is God's love and grace. I do believe though that we are all vulnerable to sin. We all need a Savior. I think the best definition of sin is that sin is what hinders us from receiving God's love.

But hear the good news my friends, as you confess your sin before God and others, you have the assurance that your sins are forgiven. This is grace.

Ephesian 2: 8 and 9 says, that for by grace you are saved through faith, and that this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God- not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” The beautiful truth is forgiveness, grace, salvation is all because of the unconditional love of Jesus Christ.

We do not earn it, but we are able to freely receive it because of Christ’s love and sacrifice for us on the cross.

We do need a Savior. Although, we are deeply and inherently good, we also have sin and death. Therefore, we need God by God’s Holy Spirit to forgive our sins and empower us to love others.

In our passage today that we read from Romans, the Apostle Paul gives voice to the struggle that everyone experiences. He says it so well in verse 15, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.”

Paul, who himself at one point was a persecutor of Christians, understands the struggle that all people have with sinful tendencies. He acknowledges that reality, but he also highlights later in our passage that there is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus and that Christ condemned sin in the flesh in order to fulfill the law. Paul's conclusion is that since Christ has taken care of sin, we are invited to live according to the spirit rather than the flesh."

To summarize then, what Jesus offers us is the grace of forgiveness for our sins and the call to not live bound to sin, but rather freed up by grace to walk in the power of the Holy Spirit.

I remember during my Doctoral studies, I took a class on Desert Spirituality and my teacher took a couple days to reflect on many different forms of sin. It was insightful information about the struggle with sin that is common for humanity, but I remember feeling depressed after hearing him reflect on sin.

As I prepared today's message, I decided not to list a bunch of sins for you. Rather I will share two types of sin that I think we all can relate to and then focus instead on the gift of forgiving grace.

One sin, that we can all relate to at some level is pride. Some theologians talk about pride as the root of all sin and all evil. This type of pride is different than being proud of someone, ourselves, or a group of people. When sin is connected to pride the idea is that my viewpoint is superior to others and therefore I am better than others. As the saying goes, pride comes before the fall. In the area of spirituality, one temptation we have as human beings is to act as if we are superior to others and to even act as if we are God. The truth is even though I believe our deepest nature is divine and originates with God, we are not to seek equality with God, but similar to Jesus in his earthly life, we are to humble ourselves and follow God. Following God means walking by the Spirit and requires that we acknowledge our sin and our need for a Savior in Jesus Christ. One of the key reasons to believe that human

beings have a sinful condition is to keep us in a posture of humility, so that we recognize our dependence on God and God's love.

One group of people that I appreciate as we think about the characteristic of humility are folks who are in recovery. I have a few friends who are in recovery for alcohol addiction and they are some of the most humble people I know. They do not pretend to have power within themselves alone to stay sober. Instead they rely on the grace of God, which includes the support of AA groups and sponsorship to help them maintain sobriety. I want to share with this congregation the good news that our church as of the last couple of weeks is hosting AA groups now in our Fellowship Hall. Monday, Friday, and Saturday nights. AA groups meet here at our church through the AA group called KISS, which stands for Keep It Simple Sweetheart.

What is wonderful about AA groups is that at the foundation of the whole movement is grace. People who join AA or Celebrate Recovery groups acknowledge that they need God or some form of higher power

and that they are helpless to heal themselves without the power of grace.

I think Forgiving grace is a wonderful way for us to understand God's heart for God's creation and AA groups are one expression of God's heart.

A second sin beyond pride that I wanted to mention today is self-rejection. If pride is thinking too much of oneself, self-rejection is not loving oneself enough. I think we all are tempted at times to be self-critical. We think so poorly of ourselves that we start to neglect our bodies or we find ourselves filled with negative thoughts. Self-rejection is a sensitive topic as it relates to sin, because often times if we lack a positive self-image it may be because of abuse or neglect from others. It may not be something that we choose to do, but something that is a burden we carry.

In the area of self-rejection, we need to remember that grace is available to us. We need to remember there is always forgiveness if our



self-rejection is related to guilt or shame from poor choices we made or ongoing struggles with behavior. There is forgiving grace available to us always. There is also original grace or the beautiful truth that we have inherent goodness even though we struggle with sin in various ways.

In summary friends, I want to let you know whether you struggle with pride or self-rejection or both to some degree, grace is available to us in Jesus Christ. It is okay to not be okay. Jesus is not overwhelmed or intimidated by our sin. We cannot out sin God's grace and there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus. All God asks of us is to admit we need help. We need God. Jesus invites us to stay in relationship with him and not to fixate on our sins, but rather to confess them and find freedom and healing as we graciously learn to walk in the Spirit.

If you struggle to love yourself because of the burden of sin, receive the good news today, that Jesus offers you forgiving grace. I also encourage you to reach out to a friend, a family member, or maybe a therapist,

spiritual director or me your pastor when you need someone to help you experience grace and forgiveness. We are all on the same journey to find healing. We all our vulnerable to sin, which is why the church is here as a place of grace and healing for all.

Let us pray together...AMEN.