

Sermon by The Rev. David R. Hackett
Pentecost 3, June 13, 2010

I have a couple of questions for you this morning. Who do you need to forgive? From whom do you need forgiveness? Take some time with those answers. You may want to put them into your subconscious and let your mind work on them. Meanwhile, I'll go on with the sermon.

Sunday after Sunday we gather to worship. But who do we worship? Holy Scripture doesn't give us an absolute or iron-clad picture of what the God we worship is like. For instance, some of the psalms depict God as having forsaken the chosen people. Other psalms speak of a God of "tender mercies." This morning's psalm speaks of God as our "hiding place", who forgives us the guilt of sin and "preserves us from trouble." On the other hand, what kind of God would be drawn into a cosmic bet with Satan as depicted in the Book of Job? Or what kind of God sends a Messiah who is born in a stable and who dies on a cross?

So what kind of God do we worship? This may be the question faithful people always bring when they worship. Sunday after Sunday we come to explore this question. We are familiar with the traditional Trinitarian doctrine of Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. This morning's scripture readings add yet another dimension to our portrait of the Holy One: *God the Forgiver*. That aspect of God, the dimension of the Forgiver, coupled with God as Judge, is beautifully depicted in this morning's lesson from the Hebrew scriptures.

When I was growing up I had mixed feeling about being named David. It just didn't have the same "feel" to it as names like John or Mark. Single syllable names somehow feel stronger, don't they? But I did enjoy the image of the biblical David. David and Goliath: the weak overcoming the strong; David the singer, the musician, the shepherd boy who becomes David the King. It wasn't until later that I read the rest of the story: David the adulterer, David the schemer, David the murderer.

The biblical David is so human, maybe too human. He is so much like all of us in his many-sided personality. He has the capacity for greatness and a penchant for pettiness. He is able to express, in the most wonderful way, *imageo dei*, the image of God in us. And, at the next point in his life to be, as Tallulah Bankhead once said about herself, "I'm as pure as the driven slush."

You remember the story. David becomes King Saul's court musician, then follows Saul to the throne. He is a mighty warrior-king, killing tens of thousands of the enemies of Israel. He becomes the greatest king in Israel's history. And with that power came temptation and corruption.

When he sees the beautiful Bathsheba bathing on a rooftop in his capital city of Jerusalem he becomes obsessed with her, he lusts after her, and then falls in love with her. They have an affair and she becomes pregnant. Her husband, Uriah, is a Captain in David's army. In one of the most despicable schemes in history David has Uriah transferred to one of the advanced units on the front line where he is sure to be killed. And he is. That's where today's lesson picks up.

After Uriah's death, David marries Bathsheba. Nathan the prophet is compelled by God to challenge his king and his actions. He tells a wonderful and striking story of a rich man who

had many sheep, who takes a poor man's only lamb. David is outraged at such an injustice, saying that the man should die for his action. Nathan confronts David with his sin and declares, "You are the man." At that, David confesses his sin, asks forgiveness, and receives it as the prophet pronounces, "Now the Lord has put away your sin." Note that it is very clear in the story that forgiveness doesn't erase the consequences of the sin. It is clear that sin, alienation, and brokenness cause chaos in David's life. But forgiveness has occurred.

In today's Gospel lesson from St. Luke we have a story of Jesus going to dinner at a religious leader's home, a Pharisee by the name of Simon. A prostitute comes into the dining area and anoints Jesus' feet with ointment and kisses his feet. Simon is scandalized. But Jesus' response? He forgives the woman her sins. And he says to the indignant Pharisee, "The one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."

That's today's theme: forgiveness and too little love. Many years ago J. B. Phillips wrote a book, *Your God Is Too Small*. The title could be changed for this morning, "Your Love Is Too Small." We operate out of limited love. Today's scripture reminds us of that fact. It contrasts the limited love of humanity with the unlimited love of God.

Limited love prompted David to have Uriah killed in battle in order to cover up his adultery. Limited love caused Simon the Pharisee to question Jesus for allowing a known sinner to touch him. Limited love isn't just found in the Bible. Today we see limits put on love in many ways. The debate over our immigration laws shows how limited we are in our society. How do we balance law and love? The outcry against amnesty for millions of illegal aliens who have been living in this country for years is interesting to me. As a Christian I happen to think that amnesty, or pardon, or forgiveness is a good thing. We see limited love in our society when we see the increasing gap between us who have, and those who have not. We love those who are like us...it seems.

So, we know that our human love is limited love. We, all too often, operate out of conditional love, "I'll love you, *if*...." Our forgiveness is all too often the same way. "*If* you change, *if* you're really sorry, *if* you promise never to do it again, *if* you make the right amends over the right amount of time, *then* I might get around to forgiving you. Maybe! There will be no guarantees because my self-respect, my offended pride, my value system demands no less.

Well, of course you know as well as I that the problem is pride. We can't forgive others because of our pride. So instead of forgiving, I'll just end the relationship. We can't receive forgiveness because of our pride. Because that means admitting I've done something that needs to be forgiven. Both the one who forgives and the one who needs to be forgiven must swallow the same thing: their pride.

I believe that's what Jesus meant when he taught us to pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Jesus is not saying that God's forgiveness is conditional on our forgiving others, is he? Well, maybe....in a sense. I think he is saying that the pride which keeps us from forgiving is the same pride which keeps us from accepting forgiveness. And so we pray to God, "Please help us to do something about it!"

Remember the questions I asked at the beginning of this sermon? Who do you need to forgive? From whom do you need forgiveness? Do you have your answers? I can assure you of this: you can't do it by yourself. You will need God's help to forgive and be forgiven.

Perhaps the most powerful symbol of forgiveness in the modern world rests on what is left of the high altar of the charred, skeletal remains of Coventry Cathedral firebombed by the Germans in World War II. On the altar is set a cross – an unadorned cross of charred timbers: stark, simple, and powerful. A cross that makes everybody looking at it simply stop and be silent. Underneath the cross are the words, “Father, forgive.”

Not, “Father forgive those murderous Nazis”, but simply, “Father, forgive.”
Forgive them. Forgive us. Forgive everybody. Forgive King David. Forgive Simon the Pharisee. Forgive the prostitute. Forgive those of us who live our lives not forgiving others. Forgive those of us who forgive others. Forgive those of us who live our lives somewhere in between. Forgive, Father, those who are offended by your unprovoked, unmerited forgiveness. Forgive us all, and in turn, help us forgive all those who have sinned against us. Amen.