

Forgiveness is Not an Accident

Psalm 51:1-17 (NRSV)

February 21, 2007

Ash Wednesday

On the corner of State Roads 5 and 120 up in LaGrange County, there is a campground. The best thing about the place is that there is also a little ice-cream shop on the corner. It's a great place to go in the summer when it is hot and you need to cool off a little bit.

Also on the corner is a steel guardrail like the one we have out in the middle of the Airport Expressway. I remember turning at that corner one day a few years ago in a blinding snow storm. Just minutes before I got there, someone had come from the other way, missed the corner, and slid up on the guardrail. I have never before seen anything like this. I was astonished to see this car, with its two occupants sitting uninjured in their seats, perfectly balanced on that rail. All four wheels were about three feet off the ground and it was slowly and gently rocking back and forth in the wind.

I called 911. After asking if there were any injuries and being told that the people in the car were alright, the police dispatcher told me that an officer was on the way and that the weather conditions were too dangerous for me to hang around. They didn't want to take the chance that someone might run into my car because of the slick roads.

I thought about those folks and knew that their insurance company wasn't going to be too happy with them. Having guided three children through their early years of driving, I am well aware of how unforgiving insurance companies can sometimes be.

But there are always exceptions. I first saw Dennis Haysbert the actor, when he played the President of the United States on the first few seasons of "24." He is now playing the character of a tough army sergeant on the television series, "The Unit." He's big and tall and boy, do I wish I had his voice. All preachers, in fact, should be so lucky.

Anyway, he is also doing television commercials for Allstate Insurance company. The selling point for this automobile insurance is its "accident forgiveness." If you drive for a certain period of time free from traffic accidents, but then happen to have one, the company will promise not to raise your rates. I think it's a great idea.

On this Ash Wednesday, as we begin the season of Lent, I guess that I would like to put a question to you. Here it is. If large impersonal insurance companies, whose major goals are to make profits for its shareholders, can offer forgiveness for mistakes, can you imagine what sort of grace God can offer?

A few weeks ago, Toni and I rented a movie to watch one evening. It was "The King" starring William Hurt. In the movie, he was a pastor who, before becoming a Christian, had fathered a child by a woman he did not marry.

Twenty years later, this young man had gotten out of the Navy and came looking for the father he had never met. It came as quite a shock because the father had never been open about his past with his wife and two teenaged children. They knew nothing about the unacknowledged son.

As the truth became known and the family struggled to make sense of what they considered to be a betrayal, the pastor knew that he needed to come clean to his congregation as well.

The next Sunday, with his son sitting in the pew, he confessed his sins in public asking for the congregation's forgiveness. One by one, as the camera panned over the congregation, the people began filing out of the sanctuary, unable or unwilling to offer him the forgiveness he so desperately sought.

In the Old Testament book of II Samuel, we find King David, who was fairly settled on his throne, but had not yet defeated all of the nation's enemies. One spring, he sent his armies out to the field of battle, but stayed behind in his palace. He took a nap one day and then got up to stretch his legs up on his roof. While he was looking out over the city, he noticed an incredibly beautiful woman taking a bath. He found out that her name was Bathsheba and so he sent for her. Unable to resist the king, she at once found herself in his presence.

Back in the 1970's, there was a musical group named "The Starland Vocal Band." They were a one hit wonder with their song, "Afternoon Delight." They could have been singing about David. My personal belief is that David acted as a sexual predator in this case. He had the power. Bathsheba had none. He could force his will on anyone, at any time, under any circumstances. Bathsheba had no chance to resist. The fact that she was married mattered not at all to the King. The end result of that afternoon's dalliance was that Bathsheba became pregnant.

So David recalled Uriah, her husband, from the field, telling him to go home to his wife for rest and comfort, thinking that he would come to believe that the child was his. But he wouldn't even think about it because his troops were out on the battle lines sleeping on the hard ground. He said that he didn't deserve the comforts of home with his men in danger.

David changed his tactics and got Uriah drunk, thinking that this would get him home to his wife. But this didn't work either. Uriah was a man of honor who wouldn't think of indulging in the pleasures of home when his men were putting their lives on the line in a military campaign.

Finally, David sent word to Uriah's field commander, telling him to put the soldier in the front of the battle and when the fighting got heaviest, to draw back from him and let him be killed. The commander followed the king's instruction to the letter. Uriah was killed. In what is a strange sense of propriety, David waited for the appropriate time of mourning to be observed, and then brought Bathsheba into the palace to make her one of his wives.

Now David was a man of God. We know that. But in this instance, he chose not to listen to God. He chose to disregard all that he believed. He chose to act in a manner inconsistent with his faith. He chose sin over right behavior. And as is almost always the case, (ask Bill Clinton) the cover-up just increased the sin and the pain.

Years ago, I read a book by Karl Menninger of the Menninger Foundation titled, "Whatever Became of Sin?" He begins the book by telling the story of this fellow who was standing one day in downtown Chicago. Every so often, this guy would raise his arm and point to one of the people rushing about for appointments or luncheon engagements or other business. As he pointed, he would say in a loud voice, "GUILTY!" You can imagine the looks that he received from the passersby. Some were annoyed. Others were embarrassed for him. Still others chalked him up to just another of the crazy homeless people who stalk the streets of the loop.

But this one businessman, as he walked by, turned to a friend of his and said, "I wonder how he knew?"

Yes, we are all guilty: of speeding, of telling little white lies, of arrogance, of anger, of evil thoughts, and of so much more. We are all guilty.

As Menninger points out, we tend these days not to talk about sin too much. We speak of mistakes, of lapses in judgment, or of accidents. That is how we talk about sin because we don't often have a good biblical understanding of the term "sin." I think that the biblical notion of sin has to do with choice. You see, in my way of thinking, God has done a pretty good job of defining the boundaries, of laying out the parameters of appropriate and non-appropriate behavior, of defining what is acceptable and what is not. We choose to cross those boundaries of our own free will.

But sin is even more than that. The worst part about sin is that it breaks our relationship with God. Sin is so destructive that it stands in the way of our intimacy with God who desires that intimacy so much.

What can we expect from God then? How can we expect God to act? What do you think he is going to do when we sin?

After David's affair, the murder of Uriah, and the marriage of the king and Bathsheba, God sent the prophet Nathan to the king to confront him with his willful sin. David was convicted, right there on the spot. He realized that what he did was wrong and confessed, saying, "I have sinned against the Lord" (II Samuel. 12:13).

In Psalm 51, he pours out his overpowering sense of guilt. In verse 4, he prays to God and says, "Against you, you alone, have I sinned." This doesn't diminish or minimize the sins he committed against people. It is rather a realization that all sins, no matter what the content, drives us away from God.

The rest of the psalm is spent focusing on reconciliation with God. Out of his sincere remorse, David asks God to teach him wisdom, to wash him in forgiveness, to blot out his sins, to create a new and clean heart within him, to put a new spirit in him, and to restore him to relationship with God.

What can we expect from God? Is God as good as the “Good Hands People” who forgives us an automobile accident from time to time? In my opinion, God’s primary interest is to see our relationship with him restored. When we honestly approach God in confession and repentance, God quickly and easily forgives.

We still have to bear the consequences of our actions. Remember that David and Bathsheba had to face the death of their newborn as a consequence of their sin. But the guilt is forever taken away. So it is with us, honest confession and faithful repentance promises removal of the guilt we may carry because of our misdeeds.

Our sin isn’t wiped clean just so we can start over and sin again. The grace of forgiveness is about restoring our relationship. It is about our need to recognize our constant dependence upon God. The grace of forgiveness is about transforming us from people who selfishly follow the dictates of our own hearts, into people who strive to follow God’s heart.

This is Ash Wednesday, the first day of the season of Lent. It is a perfect time for confession, repentance, and seeking God’s redemption. There is no sin too little or too large to take to God. There is no sin which God isn’t able and willing and wanting to forgive.

In the movie “Walk the Line,” there is a scene involving June Carter, played by Reese Witherspoon in which she is shopping for a fishing pole. A woman in the store comes up to her and says, “Your ma and pa are good Christians in a world gone to pot.” Carter smiles and says, “I’ll tell them you said that.” The woman then continues, “I’m surprised they still speak to you after that stunt with Carl Smith. Divorce is an abomination. Marriage is for life.” To that, June Carter replies, “I’m sorry I let you down, Ma’am.”

To be honest, we all let God down each and every day when we don’t live up to the high standards to which we are called. Now is a good time to seek forgiveness because, as opposed to the insurance company, his is forgiveness that lasts.