

Pentecost +15 2020

Forgive Me

Rev. Doug Floyd

Sirach 27:30–28:7, Psalm 103, Romans 14:1-12, Matthew 18:21-35

In our lessons today, we are encouraged to show mercy to one another, to refrain from judging each other's faith, and to practice forgiveness. We continue to rehearse a pattern of loving one another in community even as we continue to cry out, "God make haste to help us."

Living and loving in community can be difficult.

We also face the challenge of living in multiple communities simultaneously. We worship in community and may actually participate in several communities of faith such as friends across multiple churches, parachurch communities, and relationships from past church associations. We also participate in family communities; some may be strained, and some may be a source of vital life. We also spend our lives in educational communities, business communities, hobby or common interest communities and other formal or informal associations. With all the variety of relations in our lives, we have plenty of opportunity to find offense, to pass judgment, to face difficult conflicts and even to experience the painful severing of relations.

We learn how to live and love with others through the grace and mercy of God. As we pause over today's Psalm, we see a pattern of God's steadfast love blessing the psalmist and flowing outward to the community and even to all creation. While there are practical and distinct challenges within every relationship, I believe a reflection on God's abiding mercy and grace gives us a starting pointing point for facing the difficulty of living in community.

Psalm 103 begins with a personal meditation upon God's steadfast love. Even as we read and hear these verses, we are invited into this same pattern of reflection in our own lives. We personalize these verses in light of our own story, in light of God incorporating us into this story of soul of His people.

Following the pattern of the Psalmist, we begin in worship. I am turning my attention toward the Lord even I as lift my voice in praise.

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name! (103:1)

I remember and do not forget His lovingkindness toward me. I regularly rehearse this ancient pattern of considering the many ways in which He has showered His blessings upon me.

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits, (103:2)

I begin to name His kindnesses toward me.

³ who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
⁴ who redeems your life from the pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
⁵ who satisfies you with good
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

The Lord has forgiven me. He rescues me from the effects of sin. I suffer and have suffered from the consequences of being born into a world of sin. From childhood wounds to painful words and actions in school to unfair treatment in the workplace. Anywhere I turn in this world, I find places where sin has corrupted and damaged me and other people.

I am not simply the victim, but I have perpetrated sinful words and actions on other people: from siblings to parents to classmates to peers or even strangers in the store. I have spoken and acted in unkind ways. I have thought unkind thoughts. Most of the time, I am completely unaware of the impact of my thoughts, words, and actions in this world. If I were to catch a glimpse of how I have set in motion a series of painful and damaging situations upon other people and the world, I would be overwhelmed in grief.

According to St. Anselm, my offenses toward other people pale in comparison with my offenses toward God. In light of today's Psalm, I rejoice that God in His lovingkindness has forgiven me and even worked in the midst of the situations where I have caused pain.

Some Eastern Orthodox writers speak of how Christ in His death, burial and resurrection steps into the reverberations of my sin that would continue to ripple through all things if not for the grace of God. The Lord sustains this world and has prevented the consequences of human failure from destroying this creation entirely.

In this sense, the mercy and grace of God ripples outward from me through the community and ultimately to all creation. The Psalmist can move seamlessly from thanking God for personal redemption to speaking of renewal for the entire community.

⁶ The LORD works righteousness
and justice for all who are oppressed.
⁷ He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.
⁸ The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
⁹ He will not always chide,
nor will he keep his anger forever.
¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us. (103:6-12)

In light of these abundant promises, we can all join in and sing,

There's a wideness in God's mercy,
like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in his justice
which is more than liberty.

There is no place where earth's sorrows
are more keenly felt than heaven:
there is no place where earth's failings
have such gracious judgement given.

There is plentiful redemption
through the blood that Christ has shed;
there is joy for all the members
in the sorrows of the head.

For the love of God is broader
than the measure of our mind;
and the heart of the eternal
is most wonderfully kind.¹

We might also join in with the Apostle Paul declaring the heights and depths and breadths of God's love that is beyond knowledge. This loving-kindness is so vast that we cannot fully search it out. We can never move beyond the horizon of this all-encompassing love.

It is so great and glorious that extends out from the community of God's people to all creation. The psalmist continues,

The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom rules over all. (103:19)

In this kingdom of loving-kindness, all creation echoes His praises. Thus the Psalmist can finally sing out,

²² Bless the LORD, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.
Bless the LORD, O my soul! (103:22)

All the works of God now sing out in endless praise of His greatness, His goodness, His glory. In response, I exclaim,

Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?²

¹ Frederick William Faber (1814-1863) and Jubilate Hymns© in this version Jubilate Hymns

² Robert Lowry (music) and Lyrics unknown < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How_Can_I_Keep_from_Singing%3F>

With this grand vision of God's redeeming grace that is fully unveiled in the work of the cross, I return to the challenge of living and loving in all our communities. Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" (Matthew 18:21). Some rabbinic debates suggested that three times should be the limit.³ There is a danger in unrestrained forgiveness. Peter goes well beyond the expected three times and suggests the image of perfect forgiveness: seven times. Jesus responds with seventy times seven or seventy-seven times. In other words, He answers that perfect forgiveness is multiplied seven times. Perfection times perfection. The number cannot be quantified. You simply cannot put a limit on forgiveness.

Immediately, Jesus tells the story of a servant who owes a king a great sum. In fact, the sum is so great it could be as high as a trillion dollars in our currency. The servant owes a sum of money that cannot be paid back. It is a debt that can never be cleared. The king forgives the debt in total.

We have already been forgiven an incalculable debt that could never have been cleared. In the cross of Christ, Jesus takes the debt upon himself. Paul makes a similar argument in the opening chapters of Romans. We simply cannot clear ourselves of the curse of sin. Only the intervening grace of God in Christ has made a way. It is only as we behold the wideness of God's mercy extended to us in our utter sinfulness that we can begin to grasp the debt of love we owe to one another, to our family, to our various communities of faith, and even in some extent to those beyond the community of faith.

This debt of love is not slavery but true freedom. As Von Balthasar has suggested,

"If we owe ourselves entirely to Christ, then we owe ourselves to divine love that has loved us "to the end" (Jn 13:1). To owe ourselves to love means to be permitted to love and to be able to love. For man that is precisely the most sublime freedom."⁴

Like the rippling described in Psalm 103, the grace of God we've encountered in our own life extends freely to the entire community and in some sense all of created is finally caught up in this grace. We participate in this ever-widening expression of mercy as we extend forgiveness, as we show one another grace even in our different expressions of worship or devotion or spiritual discipline or even mission.

If we have been wronged, there are proper times to confront and seek reconciliation as we read last week. At the same time, we ultimately trust in the cross of Christ to turn these injustices, these offenses, these wounds or damages to the good. In this moment, in this "today," we are free to express the an abundance of mercy and grace to one another. At the same time, we look ahead to our ultimate hope of resurrection in Christ that "all shall be all and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well."⁵

³ Craig Blomberg, Matthew, Vol. 22, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992) 281.

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, Light of the Word: Brief Reflections on the Sunday Readings, trans. Dennis D. Martin (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 127.

⁵ Julian of Norwich < <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/incontext/article/julian> >