

Sunday, June 16, 2013
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “The Power of Forgiveness”

Do you know what a ‘scupalune’ is?

It is an Italian word, probably slang, for a punishing blow across the face with the back of a hand.

It could perhaps be characterized as an obedience strategy used by parents at a time when striking a child seemed like an effective response to bad behavior.

My grandparents, on the Italian side, were scupalune-types.

My father, perhaps as a result, never lifted a hand to my sisters and I – never.

In many ways, the God of the Old Testament is a ‘scupalune’ type of God.

In ancient times there was a strong belief that sinning resulted in the wrath of God.

God expected people to behave and follow the commandments and when they strayed, punishment was inevitable.

It was a cultural mindset.

Today’s Old Testament reading is an illustration of this Godly power.

The passage we heard is a litany of bad behavior.

We are faced with David, a man of wealth and power, manipulating the life and death of Uriah so that he can gain possession of Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba.

There are so many sins in this story that it is hard to point to just one.

David’s manipulation for his own satisfaction effects countless lives – his own, Uriah’s, Bathsheba’s, her child, the person responsible for Uriah’s death, and future generations that incur punishment for David’s sins.

This is the problem with sinning – it never just affects the sinner.

David, who deserves a heavenly scupalune, is punished with the death of his yet-to-be born child, conceived with Bathsheba.

Again, the ripple effect – Bathsheba and her child, punished for David’s sin.

Nathan, the prophet, chosen by God to speak truth to power, cleverly points out to David the nature of his actions.

David, recognizing his wrongdoing, repents and begs forgiveness from the Lord.

This is really the suspenseful part of the story...the child is sick for seven days and David lays by its side, fasting and praying for a recovery.

The child dies after seven days and David returns to his normal routine – explaining that he held out hope in the Lord’s intervention, but now that the child has died there is nothing he can do.

He sinned. He was punished. The slate is clean.

Bathsheba bears him a second son whom they name Solomon, which means “his replacement.”

Forgiveness, in this cultural mindset, was only granted by God when the sinner took responsibility, repented and sought the Lord’s reprieve.

Once forgiven, you could start fresh.

The psalmist, who is sometimes referenced as King David, sang of the joy of those whose transgressions are forgiven, while lamenting the condition of those who keep their sins to themselves.

Fast forward to the New Testament and we find Luke’s gospel account of the woman, known as a sinner, who ventures into a dinner party to wash and anoint Jesus’ feet.

This woman and her sins are unnamed – left to our imagination.

Her behavior, however is clearly described, inviting judgment.

What kind of person would walk into someone’s house and start washing and perfuming a guest’s feet?

Well, in biblical times, feet washing was a sign of gracious hospitality.

Everyone walked everywhere and the streets were made of dirt.

This story is told to remind us that the Pharisee – the man with power – did not remember to welcome his guest with a foot wash, but the sinner – the one able to acknowledge the need of God’s grace, was willing to take a risk.

Her act of humility earned her a blessing and forgiveness from Jesus.

She comes to Jesus in love and brokenness – not repentance, bestowing honor, not seeking forgiveness.

Jesus believes that her love flows from her being forgiven, not that her love is the requirement which “earns” her forgiveness.

Forgiveness which is based upon a need for evidence of repentance first is what Jesus rejected.

The Pharisees ask: "Who is this, who even forgives sins?"

To forgive sin was the prerogative of God.

Jesus was boldly proclaiming a power that was not within the human realm.

But the lesson, and the gift that we take from this passage, is that we, like Jesus, have the power to forgive.

For Jesus, forgiveness is contingent on nothing.

He chooses to forgive whether the other person repents or not.

He offers forgiveness as a gift, freeing, those bound by sin, for new life.

Our readings today are about a certain type of forgiveness, that which is seemingly undeserved.

David was only sorry when he got caught and the unnamed woman doesn't seem to be asking for forgiveness.

The power of this undeserved forgiveness is at the heart of the Christian experience.

Forgiveness is the mark of those who follow Christ and it represents one of our biggest challenges to living our values.

Forgiveness is a choice.

It is a decision we can make to let go of those things that we hold against others and, perhaps more importantly, against ourselves.

Failing to forgive stifles our ability to exist, to know grace and most importantly, to understand the magnitude of God's grace.

So many of the grudges and sins we refuse to forgive in ourselves and others are trivial.

Yet our refusal to let go can damage our ability to understand the magnitude of God's grace for us.

By refusing to trust that God has indeed been gracious to us, we are unable to be gracious to others.

Who is this that even forgives sin? It is the Christ, the Son of God.

He forgives us, so that we can forgive others and ourselves.

What a gift.

Forgiveness encompasses all of the virtues and values that we have looked at in this study.

Compassion, truth, trust, love, faith, hope, humility – all of these go into the act of forgiveness.

Perhaps, our church motto should be "*Forgiven and Forgiving.*"

In closing, a poem by John van de Laar

Grace And Forgiveness

It is not a perfect life we live, O God;
We are people of ambivalent goodness,
and too fragile desires for justice and righteousness;
We need your grace and forgiveness,
and your strength to bring grace into the world.

It's not a perfect world we live in, O God;
There is greed and want, exploitation and marginalization,
and too many people excluded for indefensible reasons;
We need your grace and forgiveness,
and your strength to bring grace into the world.

Remind us, O God, that it is not perfection you seek,
but humility, brokenness and repentance;
Lead us into a love for you that is reckless and selfless;
that, because we have been forgiven much,
will risk everything for you,
washing your feet,
and those of the poor and suffering,
weeping with you,
and those who grieve,
standing with the rejected and mocked,
even as we share their lot.

We need your grace and forgiveness,

and your strength to bring grace into the world. Amen.

Let us pray for the grace to be forgiven and forgiving people.