

The God Who Forgives Us

From the sermon series: God, Our Ally

Text: Micah 7: 18-19; Romans 11: 33-36

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

God is our Ally.

That is the center of our faith, the heart of the biblical revelation. He is there for us, our friend, at our side, on our side. Our lives are undergirded by His faithfulness and mercy, overshadowed by His love.

Even when we cannot sense it amidst tragedy, in the darkness, He holds us still. Even when our conscience condemns us and our guilt threatens to overwhelm us - even then, God is our Ally, for He is the God Who forgives us. That is the theme of this message.

We recite the familiar Apostles' Creed and we affirm,

I believe the forgiveness of sins.

That is a great affirmation. That speaks to the deepest need of the human heart - to be forgiven, to be accepted, to be right with God. That which is our deepest need is that which God has provided, for He is a God Who forgives us.

Micah ends his prophecy with a great exclamation of hope and confidence, an expression of sheer wonder at the grace and mercy of God.

Who is a God like Thee? Thou takest away guilt, Thou passeth over the sin of the remnant of Thy people... Thou wilt show us tender affection and wash away our guilt, casting our sins into the depth of the sea.

This amazed exclamation comes at the end of a prophetic book that had dealt seriously with the sin of God's people, Judah. Micah prophesied near the end of the Eighth Century, B.C. With Amos, Hosea and Isaiah he formed the quartet of Eighth Century prophets that represents the golden age of Hebrew prophecy. The social structures of Judah were in a state of deterioration. The nation lacked moral integrity and Micah realized that this people was ripe for judgment.

He was a contemporary of Isaiah and although Isaiah, too, knew of the sin of the nation, he could not yet conceive of the fall of Jerusalem. Micah, however, predicted that fall, believing that Judah was not immune to the righteous judgment of God. He did not whitewash the estate of a people who had left the paths of righteousness.

But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin. (3:8)

Micah was no "soft touch."

But true to the prophetic tradition and the whole biblical perspective, judgment was not the outpouring of the wrath of a vengeful God Who found pleasure in destroying but rather the disciplining hand of a loving Father Whose purpose was always and forever the redemption of His children. For Micah, then, the last word was not judgment, but grace; not wrath, but mercy.

He does not retain his anger forever because he delights in steadfast love.

The forgiving grace of God is the last word and the psalm that concludes this prophetic book sings it beautifully with a sense of wonder - the wonder known and understood by all who know what it is to be forgiven.

Let us attempt to understand the wonder expressed in our text by acknowledging the biblical diagnosis of the human condition - the condition of sin.

We can get this diagnosis from Micah or any other biblical writing. The text is a statement that takes this human condition for granted; it is an expression of amazement at the forgiving grace of God, given the human condition of sin. Paul cites a Psalm and puts it bluntly:

All have sinned.

To be in a state of sin is to be in a state of alienation from God and one's neighbor. In the Old Testament the Genesis stories portray the human person doubting God's word and God's goodness, the unwillingness to live as creature trusting the Creator, but rather wanting to usurp the place of God and to be Lord of one's own destiny. It was Israel's lack of trust in God that is portrayed as the root of their alienation and separation from God, which led to all the disastrous consequences of their corporate and individual lives.

Sin is an old fashioned word. Its reality has been soft-pedaled, its seriousness denied. Yet its manifestation is universal and its devastating effects everywhere to be seen. Anyone with a pinch of common sense must acknowledge that something is wrong. Those profound stories in Genesis, full of symbolic meaning,

tell us that something is wrong indeed, because we are out of relationship with the God Who created us for Himself.

Modern psychiatry recognizes that something is wrong. A few years ago Karl Menninger of the famed Menninger Clinic wrote a book that was titled, *Whatever Became of Sin?* in which he implored the pulpit to preach on human sin because this was to recognize the humanity of persons - that they are free and responsible beings, accountable, with the need and capacity to repent. Otherwise we rob persons of their unique humanness, their freedom and responsibility, making them marionettes in a cosmic drama of fate.

This is the biblical perspective... God is good and not the author of evil. We make wrong choices, foolish and brazen, and create chaos for ourselves and our world. We get entwined in a web of wrong and we are wrong-headed and wrong-hearted. We must own our wrong but we cannot unwrite the record of our deeds. Therefore, we need to be forgiven or our situation is hopeless.

Ernest Becker, in his book, *The Denial of Death*, gives a fascinating analysis of how the biblical picture of human sin parallels the findings of depth psychology and psychoanalysis. He compares the work of the psychoanalyst, Otto Rank, with the insights of the Christian thinker, Soren Kierkegaard. He writes:

Both men reached the same conclusion after the most exhaustive psychological quest: That at the very furthest reaches of scientific description, psychology has to give way to "theology" - that is, to a world-view that absorbs the individual's conflicts and guilt and offers him the possibility for some kind of heroic apotheosis (to be exalted to the rank of a god). Man cannot endure his own littleness unless he can translate it into meaningfulness on the largest possible level. Here Rank and Kierkegaard meet in one of those astonishing historical mergers of thought: that sin and neurosis are two ways of talking about the same thing - the complete isolation of the individual, his disharmony with the rest of nature, his hyperindividualism, his attempt to create his own world from within himself. Both sin and neurosis represent the individual blowing himself up to larger than his true size, his refusal to recognize his cosmic dependence... In sin and neurosis man fetishizes himself on something narrow at hand and pretends that the whole meaning and miraculousness of creation is limited to that, that he can get his beatification from that.

Rank's summing up of the neurotic world-view is at the same time that of the classic sinner:

The neurotic loses every kind of collective spirituality, and makes the heroic gesture of placing himself entirely within the immortality of his own ego ... (p. 196)

There is not only the neurotic and the sinner's unreal self-inflation in the refusal to admit creatureliness, but also a penalty for intensified self-consciousness - "The failure to be consoled by shared illusions."

The result is that the sinner (neurotic) is hyperconscious of the very thing he tried to deny: his creatureliness, his miserableness and unworthiness. (p. 197)

But there is a significant difference between the classical sinner and the modern neurotic.

Both of them experience the natureliness of human insufficiency, only today the neurotic is stripped of the symbolic world-view, the God ideology that would make sense out of his unworthiness and would translate it into heroism. Traditional religion turned the consciousness of sin into a condition for salvation; but the tortured sense of nothingness of the neurotic qualifies him now only for miserable extinction, for merciful release in lonely death. It is all right to be nothing *vis-à-vis* God, who alone can make it right in His unknown ways; it is another thing to be nothing to oneself, who is nothing. (p. 197)

In Rank's own summary:

The neurotic type suffers from a consciousness of sin just as much as did his religious ancestor, without believing in the conception of sin. This is precisely what makes him "neurotic"; he feels a sinner without the religious belief in sin for which he therefore needs a new rational explanation. (p. 198 in Becker from Rank, *Beyond Psychology* p. 193)

Thus declares Becker:

Thus the plight of modern man: a sinner with no word for it or, worse, who looks for the word for it in a dictionary of psychology and thus only approaches the problem of his separateness and hyperconsciousness. Again, this impasse is what Rank meant when he called psychology a "preponderantly negative and disintegrating ideology." (p. 198)

And sounding like a biblical prophet, Rank concludes, according to Becker, that

if neurosis is sin, and not disease, then the only thing which can "cure" it is a world-view, some kind of affirmative collective ideology in which the person can perform the living drama of his acceptance as a creature. Only in this way can the neurotic come out of his isolation to become part of such a larger and higher wholeness as religion has always represented. (p. 198F)

That is the conclusion of the best insight of the science of psychoanalysis and it is a striking conclusion. Believing religion an illusion, Rank nonetheless believed that human health could be achieved only by living in that illusion. Only thus could the isolation and alienation of creatureliness be overcome by one being caught up in a larger framework of meaning and purpose.

The diagnosis of the human condition is the same whether read from the Bible or from the journals of psychiatry. The terminology differs but the meaning is the same.

The human being turned in upon himself, rejecting the status of creature, grasping for autonomy - that person is in biblical terminology a sinner, in the parlance of modern psychology a neurotic.

Probably as much as anybody, Robert Schuller has attempted to utilize the findings of the psychological science in his presentation of the Gospel. In his book, *Self Esteem*, he contends that we are born with a lack of trust. This is suggested by Erik Erikson in his studies in child psychology. Thus Schuller contends we are by nature fearful, anxious, but not wicked. However one responds to Schuller's dialogue with classical Reformed theology, he does make an important point. For too long in the Church we have assaulted the dignity of human personality and have ground persons even deeper into the paralysis of their sinful condition with our heavy handed preaching of human sin.

The question is not whether we are sinful and thus commit sins for which we are guilty. That is plain for anyone to see. The question is rather how can we understand the human predicament and meaningfully bring the Gospel to that predicament so that human transformation will result?

Somehow we must recognize that all the wrong we do, all the hell on earth we create, is a reflection not of the human nature God created in his own image, but of a negative response of that human nature which fails to understand God, itself, and the way to wholeness.

This is not to downplay the havoc wrought by the person. Schuller uses the image of a golf ball. Outside is a thin, dimpled cover. Beneath are layers and layers of rubber wrappings. The core is a hard rubber ball. To describe a golf ball simply in terms of the outer cover is superficial. The real nature of the golf ball is still unknown. The outer cover he compares to human rebellion. But whence comes that rebellion? Schuller claims we are like that golf ball. At the core is a natural lack of self-esteem, a negative self image - all coming from a lack of trust. From that core come all those rubber wrappings: anxiety, fear and all negative emotions resulting in a face that appears angry, mean, rebellious. At the core of our being we are non-trusting, insecure, defensive and our response to life is angry, negative, destructive. Projecting our fear and suspicion outward, we ruin our interpersonal relationships and generally make a mess of our lives and the community.

Berkhof in his *Christian Faith* sees our sin "rooted in the creaturely structure of the risky being called man." We do seem to live in two worlds; we are part of the animal kingdom and we are created in the image of God. There is both our misuse of freedom and therefore our guilt and there is a gravitational force from below. In Berkhof's terms:

Sin is not a fall from a higher form of existence, but the refusal to rise to the higher form of existence of loving fellowship with God. Sin is contrary to nature precisely because it is a yielding to the pull of our inherited nature. Man falls victim to it if he does not in confidence, in surrender, and in obedience open himself to the call from on high as it invites him to join unconditionally and with his whole being in God's venture of a joint history with man. (p. 207)

While not contending that Schuller and Berkhof are saying the same thing or share a common analysis of the human condition, this much can be said - and needs to be said - it is possible to understand the sinful behavior of persons, acknowledging the seriousness of the wrong that we do, without painting the human being as a monster, wicked and incorrigible.

Invited to friendship with God from above, pulled by a gravitational force from below, the human being is both guilty and tragic, wonderful and capable of transformation.

What, then, is the deepest human need?

Is it not unconditional love, unlimited grace, full acceptance and free forgiveness?

What we most need God provides, for He is the God Who forgives

If the rather long path we have taken to diagnose the human condition is accurate - the biblical picture, the insight of psychoanalysis, of Schuller and Berkhof, then what is it that can effect human transformation? How can human nature be changed? Simply stated: An encounter with unconditional love and grace.

If it is true that at our core we are lacking in trust, fearful and anxious and if all forms of negative behavior are the consequence, then it is precisely in the experience of being encountered by an all-embracing grace and a non-threatening love that we will find our anger dissolved, the shell of our hostility shed and our defenses fall away.

The Gospel is the good news about God whose nature is love and Whose love in action toward us is grace. And God encounters us in Jesus Christ. It is when we encounter God in Jesus Christ that we know what it is to be unconditionally accepted and embraced by grace. We meet God when we meet Jesus and we meet Jesus when we meet a brother or sister in whom he lives and through whom he loves.

Then we may well exclaim with Micah,

Who is a God like thee? Thou takest away guilt... casting our sins into the depths of the sea.

Is it that simple? Yes, it is. But it is not cheap. The story of Jesus reveals the costliness of that forgiveness. His life, his death. He lived a fully human life in total harmony with the Father. He bore our sin in his body on the tree. God made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. We are forgiven through Jesus Christ our Lord. We are accepted in Jesus. When we can receive that, "hear" that, really appropriate that, we are changed, transformed, inside out.

The Gospel announces forgiveness through the grace of God; He the God Who forgives us.

No wonder Micah exclaimed in wonder,

Who is a God like thee?

Paul was awestruck, too, at the forgiving grace of God offered in Jesus Christ. In Romans 9-11 he struggles with Israel's failure to believe in Jesus as their Messiah. He finally concludes that in the mystery of God's ways Israel's disobedience has resulted in the salvation of the Gentile world but he never gives up on Israel either. Quoting from Isaiah 27:9,

From Zion shall come the Deliverer; he shall remove wickedness from Jacob, And this is the covenant I will grant them, when I take away their sins...

He contends that God will one day remove Israel's sin as well because he is certain of the faithfulness of God and the unconditional nature of his promise.

"... God's choice stands, and they are his friends for the sake of the Patriarchs. For the gracious gifts of God and his calling are irrevocable." (11:28-29)

He can only conclude - even though he cannot fully fathom -

For in making all mankind prisoners to disobedience, God's purpose was to show mercy to all mankind. (11:32)

This leaves him breathless. In a mood similar to Micah's, he breaks out in grand doxology:

O depth of wealth, wisdom and knowledge in God! How unsearchable his judgments, how untraceable his ways! ... Source, Guide and Goal of all that is - to him be glory for ever! Amen." (11:33-36)

What a doxology! What a God! And what calls forth that irrepressible praise of the whole human being? The marvel of a grace that forgives! God is a God Who forgives us! Now if only we could believe it; if only we could receive it.

Let me speak of God's forgiveness lifting up some aspects of it that may cause us to sense more deeply its wonder and to appropriate more fully its blessing.

The first thing I would point out is that God's forgiveness has already been provided - it is a reality now offered unconditionally to all who will receive it. God does not hold us at arm's length, seeing first if we measure up, if we are worthy, if we will do it all right now and not abuse His free grace. We do not deserve it.

It was while we were yet enemies that we were reconciled - while we were yet sinners that Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6-8)

Forgiveness is not conditional on good behaviour; there is no parole system with God - just a declaration of undeserved mercy and freedom from the guilt of our sin. Forgiveness is not a future possibility if in the meantime we keep our nose clean. Forgiveness has already been procured through the one offering of Jesus and is ours *now*.

There is now therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:1)

The Gospel is not a religion. A religion has a teaching, a ritual, a way of life. Christianity is a religion, but the Gospel is the announcement of what is true now because God has acted: Forgiveness is provided already - secured, forgiveness is freely offered, forgiveness can be now received - received only as gift.

A second reflection I would share is that it is those who need it most who find it the most difficult to receive it and personally to appropriate it.

Certainly there are those who bulldoze their way through life with seemingly little sensitivity to the havoc they produce and the hurt they inflict. But I am more concerned about the one of sensitive conscience, the one who longs to be right but senses her failings and perhaps even despairs, feeling simply a failure. That one tends to withdraw from the grace of God and from the fellowship where that grace is extended. Such a one feels unworthy which is true enough; yet it is precisely there that the misconception of forgiveness manifests itself. For if I do not allow myself the luxury of grace, being unworthy, then I must be saying that those who do receive it are worthy and then, of course, grace is no longer grace.

When I feel wrong, then I feel I do not belong. Withdrawal, isolation, alienation - the bitter fruits of failure and despair not dispensed by God's unconditional grace that will never be defeated, will not give up or let go.

I wonder if in this state we do not take ourselves too seriously. Are we so all-important and our sin of such cosmic dimension that even God can not forgive us and create for us a new beginning? Is not such withdrawal really the last holdout of pride that says, "I will do it on my own or I will not do it"?

This leads me to a third observation which follows as a matter of course: Forgiveness is only for the helpless, the hopeless, the one who cannot help himself. We know that; it is a truism of the Gospel. But we find it difficult to keep that truth before our minds. That is inevitable in the Church, I suppose. In the Church you hear about the "oughtness" of life. Certainly there is an "oughtness" in Christian existence:

We ought to love God.

We ought to love our neighbor.

We ought to live truthfully, honestly, nobly, purely, faithfully, etc.

Thus the Church becomes the society of oughtness, the place where duty and obligation are set forth, the place where discipline and censure are applied and where failure is not easily tolerated. It is the last place one would dare be honest about his life. Thus develops the paradoxical situation that the place of grace becomes a place of judgmental spirit and the place of Good News becomes the place of bad news.

And what kind of people do we form? People grim-faced, tightly wound, anxious, masking their real life full of conflict and ambiguity behind a facade of community respectability, lacking real spontaneity and joy.

Are you a hopeless case? You are very near the Kingdom; you are forgiven; breathe easy and begin to enjoy the journey.

Finally, I can hear a chorus of dissent: You make the Gospel too easy; you make a mockery of the Christian life. To that I can only say I will take that risk if only I can help one suffering, sensitive struggler to hear and receive the Gospel of forgiveness. And further, religion doesn't work anyway; it only binds another burden on people and places one more monkey on their back. Religion never transformed anyone. It controls, manipulates, keeps one in line (in public,) but it can never free and heal and make whole.

If I am accused of announcing a grace that might put in jeopardy duty and obligation and law, then I am in good company; St. Paul was likewise objected to. He spoke glowingly of the triumph of grace in his Roman letter:

But where sin was thus multiplied, grace immeasurably exceeded it, in order that, as sin established its reign by way of death, so God's grace might establish its reign in righteousness, and issue in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 5:21)

That "immeasurably exceeded" follows an earlier "vastly exceeded by the grace of God" in verse 15 and an "in far greater measure" -verse 17. Thus Paul knows what will be countered.

What are we to say, then? Shall we persist in sin, so that there may be all the more grace? (6:1)

He answers sharply, "No, no!"

And his answer contains the key to mystery of human transformation; it is precisely the reality of an unconditional love and gracious acceptance that triggers inward change; this is the reality that by the Spirit effects new birth.

Law can point the way, Law can indicate duty, Law can carry with it threat, Law can hem us in, bind us up, keep us in tow, effecting an external conformity to righteousness, But Law cannot change us. Law will never make us dizzy with wonder, speechless in awe finally to exclaim, "What a God!"

Who is a God like Thee?

God is our Ally; He is the God Who forgives us.

References:

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