

THE FORGIVENESS BUSINESS – FOR THE KINGDOM

At the very tail end of the Gospel of Luke, where we would expect summation and conclusions, we get these words: *“So you see that scripture foretells the sufferings of the Messiah and his rising from the dead on the third day, and declares that in his name repentance bringing the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations beginning from Jerusalem. You are to be witnesses to it all. I am sending on you the gift promised by my Father; wait here in this city until you are clothed with power from on high.”* (Luke 24:46-47)

It has been many years since this amazing assignment was proclaimed and published. Do we still remember who we are and what our assignment is? I was “raised in the church,” far more so than many of you, and this is certainly not the core of what I thought we were for or about. I thought we were trying to be good. I thought we were trying to be good examples of the kind of life God wanted us to live. I thought we were supposed to be a light to the world – only, I thought that meant we ourselves were supposed to be the light, not just Messengers of the light, so people might know where to find light when they wanted it badly enough.

In short, I was raised with the Message all twisted around and backward in my mind. I thought we were supposed to be good examples, models of righteousness – illustrations of the good life that others could follow into the Kingdom of Heaven, if or when they wanted to live good lives themselves.

I thought we were supposed to “preach” and stand for goodness. But that is quite the opposite of what the Gospel of Luke is declaring and proclaiming. In Jesus’ name we are supposed to be declaring REPENTANCE. Repentance is at the other end of the spectrum from goodness. We are supposed to be declaring, talking about, announcing, telling those we know – even all the nations, as things unfold – about a repentance that leads to the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness is at the heart and core of the Kingdom – not goodness. Who can come to terms with that? Who can keep that straight?

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If we do not need forgiveness, we do not need God. If we do not need forgiveness, we certainly do not need the Messiah or the Cross or the Resurrection. It is a scathing indictment to suggest that we need a Savior. Good people do not need a Savior; they just need to go on being good. Good people do not need to repent; they just need to go on being good. And the church of our time has wandered so far from its truth and its Message that many people within its walls are trying to pretend that they do not need repentance, conversion – a true change of purpose or direction. So we are in the Goodness Business. We are already very loving, and with the help of the sermons we hear, the groups we attend, and the good books we read, we are going to become even more loving.

Oh, I do understand some of the mind-set of our culture. We do not want to hear about “sin.” It sounds so “negative.” And if the church insists on talking about sin and repentance, then many of us will stop coming to church. But can the church really change its Message to pander to the whims or opinions of the culture around it? “*Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.*” If we do not like that, we will never like Jesus or appreciate the church He has founded.

Repentance leading to forgiveness of sins. That is the best news I have ever heard. But not if I have no use for repentance. Not if I have no problem with sin. Not if I am already just fine the way I am (thank you very much). Well, you may be fine the way you are, but I am not fine the way I am. And sometimes I do not know *how* to repent – *how* to turn and go in a new direction – without making things worse than they already are. About some things and in some situations, I am still waiting for clarity and guidance from my Lord. It may be on the way, but it is not clear to me yet. So it’s back to: “*They that wait upon the Lord*”

As I said, I grew up in the church, but somehow I got the Message all twisted around and backward. Not that I thought I was “good” when I was young. Not deep down. I just thought I was *supposed* to be. I thought that was what we were *trying* to be. And if you cannot be what you are trying to be, then you can what? Pretend? We had a lot of rules that were supposed to lead us into goodness. And I was trying hard to follow them – to live up to the kind of person they were describing and defining. But the more I followed the rules, the less loving I became. I did not understand this at the time. Certainly I would never have admitted it.

So I arrived at the First Congregational Church of Amherst, New Hampshire. Well, I was a full-time student at Andover Newton Theological School at the time, but on weekends I went to Amherst to do what we called “field work.” In our church here we have “Intern Pastors”; different wording, but the same reality. Frank Weiskel was the Senior Pastor of the church at Amherst. He liked many things about me. He appreciated my conscientiousness. He knew that if I said I would do something, I would try my very best to do it. But as we worked together, went to meetings, and talked and planned about the life of the church, he became increasingly concerned about my rigid code of behavior. I only cared about people if they were serious about following the rules or if I thought I might *persuade them* to get serious about following the rules. I talked about “grace,” but for me grace was what you got if you were really serious about living the good life according to the rules. Grace was the reward for living a good life. Can you imagine? I loved the Sermon on the Mount, but I had not yet realized that Jesus preached this sermon to break our pride. I still thought Jesus preached this sermon to encourage us to try harder. I was already trying as hard as I knew how, and getting further from the grace and love of the Kingdom all the time.

Frank would repeat it on numerous occasions afterward, but I still remember the first day when he looked straight into my eyes and said, “Bruce, we are not in the morals business. We are not in the judgment business. We are in the forgiveness business.”

At first I was pretty angry and annoyed at this double-talk. If there is no code of righteous behavior, then forgiveness is neither possible nor relevant. But life in the church is real, and people are under burdens and under attack way beyond what the books and theories and assignments can make clear at seminary. In those days, it came clearest for me in the lives of the individuals who were part of my high school youth group. They did not just need to study harder to get better grades. They did not just need to learn how to conform more to the values of the society around them. They did not just need to obey and please their parents more. Some of these things could help to smooth the way in the immediate moment, but they already knew these things at least as well as I did.

Their real problems were deeper than that and tougher than that, and deeper inside of them than that. So I started to hear some of Jesus’ teachings and parables on a different level. I am still working on that, as many of you know, and as many of you are also. I have not

wrapped around it fully, but Frank was right – they needed forgiveness, not more rules or more judgment. They needed grace, and an awareness of God’s love for them that would allow them to trust God in a very broken world full of injustice and cruelty and evil. Amherst, by the way, was a very privileged, picture-perfect community on the outside. Much like Corona del Mar in that regard – only, New Englandish instead of beachish. (Is it bitchish or beachish?) Anyway, under the surface, the pressures and the temptations and the challenges can be fierce. Life on the Christian Path is never simple, never easy or automatic – no matter where we are.

REPENTANCE BRINGING THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS – that is our WAY of Life. We cannot carry this Message if we do not live this Life ourselves. It is Life IN HIS NAME, and it is anchored in Jesus’ death and Resurrection. We will revisit that a few Sundays from now. For this morning, let us stay with the forgiveness business. Is that the business you think we are in? Do you stay focused on our real mission and Message, or do you find it easy to get sidetracked into all kinds of sideshows – like feeding the hungry; helping the poor; saving the environment; fighting injustice (maybe not worldwide, but at least in your own company or family)?

These may be admirable purposes in their own right, of course. But how do they stack up beside our *real* purpose? “[S]cripture foretells the sufferings of the Messiah and his rising from the dead on the third day, and declares that in his name repentance bringing the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations”

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Is anyone still walking around unforgiven today? Even here? Some people are not interested in being forgiven. Repentance is not even a meaningful concept to many people in our culture. They are busy trying to get rich or get laid or be more successful, and if they gave it any thought, they would be afraid that forgiveness would interfere with such important purposes. Others, not crass at all, are more concerned with loved ones under pressure or fighting some dread disease or struggling with some life-threatening addiction. It has not really occurred to them that repentance and forgiveness have any connection with such things. We have a great many serious problems in our world today, so much so that many of us wonder if our world can long survive their consequences or their repercussions. But I seriously suspect that only a tiny portion of the humans alive today

see any real connection between such immense and complicated problems and the Message about a REPENTANCE THAT BRINGS THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS. Jesus may be the Messiah and the Son of God, but He brings us a Message that does not have very much to do with real life in the real world – not anymore, not in our time? God really is the Cosmic Imbecile, and Jesus is his Son?

So never mind Christianity or the church or prayer or studying the Scriptures; we have to fix things ourselves. And so we have endless programs and approaches and organizations and fund-raising campaigns, and they are all claiming that they can help us fix things. But none of them help us to heal our relationship with God. Nor do they help others to heal *their* relationships with God.

Meanwhile, Jesus keeps on inspiring various individuals who really do help in their own faithful ways. But not many are asking where this is coming from or how this actually happens.

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Jesus tells a parable about a sower. The seed is the Word of God. By the way, if you are feeling sluggish or slow this morning, the Word of God IS Jesus – the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us. And the Word is about a REPENTANCE THAT BRINGS THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS. Anyway, the seed falls on various kinds of soil. We are the soil, and the parable is asking: Which kind of soil are we? But after telling this parable, when He is alone with His disciples, Jesus tells His disciples what the parable means. Outsiders, He says, will look but see nothing and listen but hear nothing – because otherwise THEY MIGHT TURN TO GOD AND BE FORGIVEN.

It is a stunning comment for most of us. Jesus hides the Message in parables on purpose? It sounds very “unloving,” we think. It does not occur to us that spiritual truth carries great power, and that if it is given before we are ready or willing to receive it, it will do far more damage than good. In any case, Jesus’ comment is full of irony and sarcasm and pathos. We think it should be easy, clear, and simple to be the Messiah. And therefore the Message of the Messiah should be easy, clear, and simple too.

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Can we *fake* repentance? Will that not merely lead us into a counterfeit and useless forgiveness? Can anyone “repent” any time they decide to – just up and decide to do it? Does it not require an awakening of the soul within before genuine repentance is even possible for us?

In my college days, many colleges had special quartets, and most of these quartets sang a song about “Poor Johnny One Note.” He “sang out with gusto and just overlorded the place. Poor Johnny One Note yelled willy-nilly until he was blue in the face. For holding one note was his ace.” Sometimes I think that a lot of churches are like Poor Johnny One Note. They get a tiny piece of the Christian Message and that’s all they ever know, sing, or proclaim. But of course, they try to drown out all the other dimensions of the Message.

Very probably there is nobody sitting here today who has not received some forgiveness of some kind at some time in their lives. And of course, if they have, this made a huge difference in their lives. But how many dimensions of repentance and forgiveness are there? Have any of us been forgiven only once? Or forgiven for only one tiny part of our true being? And if there is more than one dimension to forgiveness, is there not also more than one dimension to repentance? Have any of us received forgiveness for all the dimensions of our souls? If so, then we are totally reconciled to God. And if that is the truth, then we have total TRUST in God in every area of our lives. We carry no more fear in our minds or hearts or souls. We are totally obedient to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Christianity and its Message – its WAY of Life – is far beyond the “Poor Johnny One Note” approaches so familiar in our time. “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.*” Absolutely! But how long does that take? One fast decision and it’s all over? “Wham, bam, thank you ma’am”? He died and rose again for THAT? Maybe it is that simple for some people, but I have never seen any evidence of it. I *have* seen lots of evidence of pretense and play-acting. The truth is, we are not Poor Johnny One Note in our souls. Quick fixes and simple formulas do not bring us into the fullness of the Christian Life.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, we have repented – but not all the way. By the mercies of the Holy Spirit, we have received forgiveness – but only insofar as we have been *able* to repent thus far in our lives. And there are many dimensions of forgiveness still waiting

for us. The world will not get perfect until all of us repent and receive forgiveness – all the WAY. That means if any of us want to bring any improvement to anything or anyone *anywhere*, we look for a new level of repentance – and we know it will lead us to a new level of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is at the very heart and core of the Christian Life and Message. Forgiveness is unavailable to us beyond the level of our repentance. There is nothing that Jesus is more adamant about, less compromising about, more insistent about. And in the New Testament, “forgiveness” means the full restoration of a relationship – not toleration, not a polite distance, not a convenient avoidance. Forgiveness *means* reconciliation: complete and total restoration of a relationship. The Good News is that this is what forgiveness means when God forgives *us*.

As we have noted already, forgiveness is at the very center of the Lord’s Prayer: “*Forgive us the wrong we have done, as we have forgiven those who wronged us.*” (REB)

“If your brother does wrong, reprove him; and if he repents, forgive him. Even if he wrongs you seven times in a day and comes back to you seven times saying, ‘I am sorry,’ you are to forgive him.” (Luke 17:3-4)

“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how often am I to forgive my brother if he goes on wronging me? As many as seven times?’ [Thanks Peter, I had that very same question.] Jesus replied, ‘I do not say seven times but seventy times seven.’” (Matthew 18:21-22)

That should have been clear enough, but Jesus follows this teaching with a story. A king decided to settle accounts with those who served him. They brought before him a man who owed him ten thousand talents. Let me translate for those of you not familiar with first-century monetary values: this man owed twelve and a half *million* dollars. What do we owe God, by the way? Money is an inadequate symbol of value. What do we owe our Creator for LIFE and everything there is?

In this story, the king decides to sell this man, together with his wife and children and everything he has (which is only just and fair), though even this will not begin to pay the debt. But his servant pleads with him, and the king is filled with pity and cancels the entire debt. Unbelievable. But then this very same servant goes to a fellow servant who owes him a hundred denarii. A significant debt, but paltry in comparison – about twelve thousand dollars, as we would figure it.

This fellow servant also begs for more time, but the guy who has just been forgiven twelve and a half million dollars has him thrown into prison until he pays his entire debt (all twelve thousand dollars). When the king hears about this, he is outraged. He repeals his leniency and decrees that the first servant shall be tortured until he has paid his debt in full.

And Jesus says that this is how God will deal with *us*, unless we forgive each other from our hearts.

The Kingdom that Jesus announces to us and invites us into runs on forgiveness and gratitude. If we feed it goodness, rules of behavior, self-righteousness, or formulas for success or approval in this world, it will stall out and come to a standstill. But the big secret is the gift the Father is giving to those who *are* repenting and finding forgiveness. He sends the Risen Messiah back to us – to guide us and be with us ... forever.