

Date: February 5, 2023 (Epiphany 5)

1. Texts: Isaiah 58:1-12; Ps. 112:1-10; 1 Corinthians 2:1-16; Matthew 5:13-20.
2. Subject: discipleship.
3. Topic: forgiveness.
4. Aim: explore topic.
5. Proposition: "What is this forgiveness for which Jesus surrendered his life?"

I JUST DON'T QUITE GET IT

"...that we may be cleansed from all our sins..." We prayed this today in the "Collect for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany". I understand the theology behind this petition, but I grapple with making it meaningful. I know it's all about the crucifixion, forgiveness and redemption, but applying such a grandiose theology that affects all of human history and existence is hard. I just don't quite get it.

We all know that Jesus died for our sins. But what does that actually mean? Did he die *because* people had sinned? Or did he die to pay off the sin debt, as it were? It's not easy.

It is even a little more complicated. It's easy to see that Jesus died for the sins of those who had already committed sins, but did he die for the sins of those still alive today? And, if he didn't, then does he have to come and die again? That's hard to grasp.

On top of this, we all know that we still continue to commit sins even after we recognize that Jesus died for our sins. It's getting monumentally difficult...

The last straw is this: we all know that we have committed sins and still feel the weight of guilt, even after whatever apologies and reparations we have made.

So, what the heck can this collect possibly mean for us in our day-to-day struggle with sin?

Merciful Lord, grant to your faithful people pardon and peace,
that we may be cleansed from all our sins and serve you with a

quiet mind; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.¹

To get our heads around this, we don't start with a definition of sin or forgiveness. We start with the identity of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Christian faith loudly proclaims that Jesus of Nazareth is the God-Man, God inside time, space and human experience. Jesus is *THE Christ*. He was conceived in Mary's womb through God's own miraculous intervention. His existence is proof that he is the one anointed by God to bring the gospel and experience of salvation to human beings. If forgiveness is to have any impact or meaning in our lives, it will only happen because Jesus is the Christ of God. The theology of our forgiveness is dependent on our theology of Christ, which the scholars call "Christology".

Our Christology also says that, because Jesus is the God-Man, he does not actually share in our history of sin. Jesus never sinned. He never cooperated with sin. He bears no sin. Jesus didn't ever have a guilty conscience.

Then, this sinless God-Man was executed by people. Think of the enormity of this crime against God. Sinful human beings, who were compounding their sin by the execution, executed God in human form. An innocent being was condemned to die.

Who are humans that they should execute God? Who are humans to claim the authority to kill God? But, Jesus assented to being killed, and human beings executed God.

So it is that in his dying, Jesus took on the burden of all sin for all time. God surrendered himself to humankind. God agreed to be executed even though he was perfectly innocent. Think of the depth of his sacrifice and love!

And his resurrection proved God's power, ability and desire to forgive even the worst of sins. Let's allow that realization to enter our hearts. [**Pause.**]

¹ "The Collect for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany", *The Book of Alternative Services*, Toronto, 1985, p. 353.

So we are forgiven, even the worst of our sins. We take advantage of God's overwhelming love through confession and repentance.

We've talked other times about the process of confession and repentance. It is the process of apologizing and receiving pardon. We say, "I'm sorry for this thing I've done," and God says, "With his death and resurrection, Jesus has already secured your forgiveness." Through confession and repentance, we experience the forgiveness Christ has won for us.

These processes depend on the identity and reality of Jesus the Christ. It is only because Jesus is the God-Man that his execution and resurrection prove the depth of God's love and of his power to forgive. It is only because he is the Christ that this enormous crime against God can be redeemed and so result in our ability to experience forgiveness for our sins.

It is with this background that we return to our original problem: "Merciful Lord, grant to your faithful people pardon and peace, that we may be cleansed from all our sins and serve you with a quiet mind..."

Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection demonstrate God's willingness, desire and power to forgive. It is through a deep realization of such truths that we may experience pardon and peace following our confession and repentance. Jesus has created the possibility of being cleansed from all our sins, and through our apology and willingness to change, we receive that cleansing.

But if we are to serve our forgiving God with a quiet mind, we darn well have to accept these truths. We have to know and believe that we are forgiven. We have to be certain that God's love is great enough to forgive even what we have done. Our Christology leads to the possibility of living a forgiven life and we have to accept that this is true even for us. Since we have already prayed this collect, we somehow have to be convinced of its truths for ourselves.

So, hear this and hear it well. I do not care what sin you or your family members have committed. I don't care what marital infidelities there have been.

Or what verbal violence has been committed. I don't care what lies you have told or what racist comments you have made. Through your apology and desire to live a new life, you have received God's loving forgiveness. To act otherwise is to reject forgiveness and love. To act otherwise is to reject Christ's sacrifice. Through your apology and changed life, you have gained access to the forgiveness Christ sacrificed to give you.

With such a realization, you can let go of the burden of your sin. You can let go of the guilt and shame. You may have to still live out the consequences of your actions, but you can let go of the burden of sin.

Without the weight of guilt and shame, you can serve God with a quiet mind.

Through our sound Christology, we have reached the point of applying our forgiveness to every day living. Believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and through that believing find pardon and peace in your own forgiveness.

AMEN.