

Sermon 041915 Forgiveness
Scripture Luke 23: 32-43, Ephesians 2: 1-10
Sermon Title- The Cost of Discipleship

This is a special request sermon. A member of our church asked me to preach on this topic. I want you to know that that is available to you, too. Feel free to ask me to preach on something that you might be struggling with.

The person was bothered by the change I made in the words of assurance. When we would say the prayer of confession together, I would come to the pulpit and say, “Our God is a forgiving God, therefore we are a forgiven people. Thanks be to God.” I changed that to a statement about God forgiving those who are truly sorry for their sins and try to change their ways. That change was bothersome to this person and she said, I think correctly, that if it bothered her it likely bothered others. So let me explain the reason for the change.

During Lent, Meg and I read a book together called, “The Cost of Discipleship” by a 20th century theologian named Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In the book, he advanced the idea of what he called ‘cheap grace’ and ‘costly grace.’ Cheap grace is the notion that God is a forgiving God so we are forgiven no matter what. Therefore, we don’t need to be sorry for our sins and we don’t need to worry about changing our behavior. Bonhoeffer wrote,

“Cheap grace is grace we bestow upon ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance.”

Costly grace is grace that you receive when you are truly sorry for your sins and resolve to change your life, thus the title of the book, “The Cost of Discipleship.” Meg pointed out correctly, I think, that my words of assurance, “Our God is a forgiving God, therefore we are a forgiven people. Thanks be to God.”

Bonhoeffer would call that cheap grace so I made the change.

To be honest, I’m not completely comfortable with the change. My problem has to do with my understanding of grace. In the New Testament letter from St. Paul to the Ephesians it reads, “By grace you are saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is a gift of God.” (2: 8)

That has always been my idea of grace. Grace is not earned; it is bestowed. Grace is a gift from God. Thomas Merton said it better than I ever could, “Grace is not a strange, magical substance which is suddenly filtered into our souls to act as a kind of spiritual penicillin. Grace is unity, oneness within ourselves, oneness with God.” I would add to that, “Grace is available only to those who are open to it. I don’t read German, which is the language Bonhoeffer wrote in. I wonder if instead of ‘grace,’ he really meant ‘forgiveness.’ Bonhoeffer’s concept works better for me if it’s called ‘cheap forgiveness’ and ‘costly forgiveness.’

Yes, I believe that our God is a forgiving God, but I also believe that God is a God of judgment. I believe we should take responsibility for our actions and should be held accountable.

When I do pastoral care I leave my theology at the door. I go with what the person I'm trying help believes. I only have one exception to that. If someone is expecting to die soon and they believe that they are going to hell because of what they have done in their life, I push back on that. I point to the Gospel of Luke story at the crucifixion. One of the two criminals hanging by Jesus was sorry for what he had done. Jesus said to him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." (Lk 23: 43)

It is never too late to repent. That criminal repented in the last moments of his life. Now, the other criminal did not repent. It was to the repenting criminal that Jesus spoke to about joining him in heaven.

I think Jesus is telling us that forgiveness is not free. Forgiveness is available to someone who is truly sorry. Sorry means truly sorry. It's not the 'sorry' we mutter without really meaning it. That I'll call 'cheap sorry.' It is to be so sorry that you resolve to turn your life around. It is a 180-degree turn away from your sinful ways and toward God. This is starting to sound like a sermon for Lent.

One component of forgiveness is to become a forgiving person. It would be presumptuous to expect forgiveness from God and not be willing to be a forgiving person. You can start forgiving by forgiving yourself. I used to beat myself up on a regular basis but I let that go when I learned to forgive myself.

As far as forgiving others goes, and I've said this before, I encourage you to forgive for self care. If you are harboring anger and resentment toward someone, that person doesn't know and doesn't care. While your holding a grudge, the other guy is out dancing. You do not want the person taking up so much real estate in your heart and mind. For the purpose of self-care let it go. Also, forgiving is not forgetting. You won't believe how much better you feel.

So repent, be sorry for your sins and resolve to turn away from sin and toward God. But here is the good news. Christianity is and always has been the religion of second chances. Christianity is the religion of light following the darkness. A new day dawns and we have a fresh chance to make it right with the world and with God.

Now, I need to revisit some territory that I've been over with you. I have told you that I will not tell you what to believe. Part of that commitment is that I won't tell you what God is like or what God thinks. I am not qualified to make those statements.

Jesus is, however. As Christians, Jesus is our source of information on the nature of God. So when I say that God is a God of forgiveness but also of judgment, Jesus is my source on that. For Christians, Jesus not only speaks for God, but is God. What we know of God, we learn from Jesus.

Jesus talked quite a bit about forgiveness often using the word forgiveness but sometimes not. I haven't preached to you yet on the parable we call "The Prodigal Son." I trust you know the story Jesus tells in the parable. My read of "The Prodigal Son" is that it is more about the forgiveness of the father than the sins of the son but Jesus never utters the word 'forgiveness' in the parable.

There also times when he uses the word forgiveness, perhaps most famously, when he said while hanging on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Lk 23: 34) We heard it from Luke's Gospel this morning.

Other words from Jesus is also from Luke's Gospel, and this speaks being a forgiving person, "Do not judge and you will not be judged. Do not condemn and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven." (Lk 6: 37) There are a number of other forgiveness messages that Jesus delivers, so much so that it is one of the hallmarks of his teachings. So, if forgiveness is important to Jesus for the Christian, we can confidently say, that our God is a God of forgiveness and of judgment.

So, let's go back to our 'Words of Assurance' after the Prayer of Confession. What Meg pointed out as 'cheap grace' for Bonhoeffer and I would call 'cheap forgiveness' in the old words of assurance is permanently changed. I will no longer do that. I have chosen to change the words of assurance to a direct quote from Jesus. We just heard it, "Do not judge and you will not be judged. Do not condemn and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven." (Lk 6: 37) Thanks be to God. AMEN