

2 Samuel 11:26-12:10,13-15

Psalm 32

Galatians 2:15-21

Luke 7:36-8:3

About four years after my Dad died, my Mom got remarried, so I got a stepfather. His name was Don. In addition to taking on my Mom's 4 children, he introduced a very interesting custom into our family. He used to give us 'un-birthday' presents. Now all of us expected to get a present on our birthdays, but the un-birthday presents were something very special. There was no expectation of getting them. We never knew when one might show up and they were completely undeserved. We didn't get them because we had accomplished something noteworthy or because we were supposed to be remembered for some reason. We got them purely because Don loved us and wanted us to know that. It might be cash in an envelope with a beautiful card or it might be something that he knew we wanted that was elegantly gift-wrapped. Always, it was an unexpected expression of love that we didn't deserve, but touched our hearts and was remembered forever. I never failed to rip open the envelope or tear off the gift wrapping with great glee in anticipation of what I might find. I was never disappointed.

The scripture lessons this morning bring us face-to-face with stories of a gift given by God to the undeserving.....that would be us. It is the gift of forgiveness. God offers it to all of us. Sometimes we are clueless about our sins and other times we are painfully aware of them. Maybe we have been sharp-tongued or mean to someone we don't like or even to someone we love. Or we've criticized someone unmercifully. Or perhaps we've gossiped.....verbally trashing someone just because we feel justified or because it makes us feel better. Maybe we are competing with someone when we shouldn't. Or perhaps we've taken something that doesn't belong to us. Or maybe we have just neglected to do something that we know we should have done. Some of the time, we know what our sins are. Much of the time we conveniently put them out of our conscious awareness. We just don't see them. So on Sunday mornings when we come to the part of the service where we are called upon to confess our sins to God, there's a period of silence before we join in saying the confession. That period of silence gives us an opportunity to bring to mind the sins for which we need to be forgiven. The silence is shorter or longer depending on how successful I am at spotting my own sins during the last week. If it's a long silence, you can be sure it's because I realize that I've been totally off the mark since our last confession and I have a lot of sins to offer up to God.

Such is the case with David in our reading from 2 Samuel this morning. David has taken something that doesn't belong to him.....Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. It probably offends us that she.....like all women of her day.....was considered property, but such was the world in which this story takes place. David not only takes her, but arranges for Uriah, her husband, to be killed in battle. When that happens David takes Bathsheba as his own wife despite the fact that God has elevated David to the position of king of

Israel, has protected him from his enemies, has given him the house of the former king and the wives of the former king. Apparently, all of that was not enough for David and he took what belonged to another.

David is approached by his friend and confidant, Nathan. Now Nathan and David are like blood brothers. They are best friends. They can and do tell each other anything and everything. It is Nathan's unpleasant mission to confront David with his own wrongdoing. He tells him a story about a rich man who has plenty of sheep of his own, but steals and kills the one sheep that belongs to a poor man to provide a meal for a visitor. David is outraged when he hears this story. He can clearly see how wrong and sinful the rich man has been. He calls for swift and immediate punishment for the rich man for his transgression. And then Nathan tells David that David is, in fact, the rich man. In what is a blinding flash of insight for David, he can suddenly see his own sin. He is devastated when he realizes the extent to which he has sinned.....both against God and against his neighbor. Nathan assures David that the Lord has put away David's sin, but there is a price to pay. There is a consequence for this heinous transgression. David will not die, but the son that belongs to him and to Bathsheba will. As horrible and as painful as that consequence is for David, we all know that enduring the consequences of our actions all the while knowing that God has ultimately forgiven us is actually a cleansing experience. And sometimes it's easier to accept the forgiveness that God offers us when we know that we have paid some sort of price for our sin.

Sometimes accepting the forgiveness is the hardest part, but when we refuse to take in the forgiveness, to internalize it, to allow it to heal us, it's a bit like being given a wonderful undeserved and unexpected gift and then refusing to open the package. In order for God's forgiveness to transform us, we must be willing to accept it.....at face value.....even though we know it is undeserved. When we refuse to let go of our own sense of guilt in the face of God's forgiveness, it is the same as rejecting this wonderful gift altogether. The gift has done us no good if we refuse to accept it. Releasing the guilt is what is required if we are going to embrace the gift and allow this undeserved forgiveness to heal us. Guilt is a useful thing if it alerts us to the fact that we have violated our own values or have sinned against God and our neighbor. It is our conscience's way of letting us know that something is amiss. Hanging on to the guilt once it has done its job is an unnecessary burden that will actually prevent us from being who God wants us to be. Hanging on to the guilt is a rejection of God. Sometimes we are prone to say, "Yes, I know that God forgives me, but I just can't forgive myself." When you cannot forgive yourself, which is one of the hardest things in the world to do, it's the same as refusing God's magnanimous gift of forgiveness to you. If you will remember what Jesus said about the two great commandments; "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and **great commandment**. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." This second commandment presupposes that we know how and are willing to love ourselves.

And surely the woman in the gospel lesson this morning must have been having trouble loving herself. We don't know much about her except that her reputation precedes her. Simon the Pharisee who has invited Jesus to dinner knows that she's not the kind of woman that Jesus should allow any where near him, if, in fact, Jesus is really a prophet. And this woman must have known Jesus' reputation as well

because she risked so much to approach him. She knows her sins are great and yet she crashes a party of a respectable Pharisee risking public censure in order to get close to Jesus. On some level, she knows that he can make her whole again. On some level, even though it appears that she has seen him before, she knows that the horrible burden of sin and shame that she carries with her for every waking hour can be removed from her by this man Jesus. We don't know if her copious tears are tears of regret for what she has done or tears of gratitude and relief for what she believes she will receive from Jesus. She huddles close to the floor, behind Jesus, almost as if she is hoping that no one will notice her. But in these circumstances, she is hard to miss. She washes Jesus' feet with her tears and then lets down her long hair to dry them. She risks more public ridicule by letting down her hair in front of strangers. She's risking everything to demonstrate to Jesus how much she loves him. And Jesus' response is not to rebuff her as Simon the Pharisee does, for all of her inappropriate behavior, but to allow her to continue with her demonstrations of love for Jesus. What is most important for Jesus it seems, is not 'appropriate' behavior that conforms to social norms and morés, but the expression of love and hospitality that this woman lavishes on him. Jesus points out to Simon, that he has offered none of the hospitable gestures that were appropriate and customary for the times, but that this woman has done all of them and in all the most loving and most extravagant ways. Jesus gives all of us something to think about as well when he explains to Simon that the one who is forgiven for just a little shows little love in return, but the one who has been forgiven many and great sins feels and shows great love in return. Perhaps it is to our advantage.....as painful as it is... to be able to have blinding flashes of insight in which we can actually see the extent of our sins that need God's forgiveness. When we are aware of having been forgiven for much we are then more likely to love God extravagantly as He loves us.

God's forgiveness is a wonderful and undeserved gift. Like the un-birthday present it comes to us at times we least expect and not because we deserve it or for some reason we should be remembered. It is given to us for no other reason than that God loves us and wants us to be reconciled to Him and wants us to be unburdened by guilt. The forgiveness is offered to us even while we are in sin. It is offered to us even before we repent. It is offered to us even when we don't know exactly what our sins are. It is a gift. A gift of love. An un-birthday present. Don't refuse it. Don't reject the wonderful gift. Rip open the envelope. Tear into the wrapping paper. Take out the wonderful forgiveness of God and use it. Embrace that forgiveness and allow God to transform you by giving you a clean heart.....a heart made out of flesh.....a heart that can love and be loved. When we offer our sinful hearts up to God, we know what is waiting for us. We know that God has forgiven us before we even ask. But when we ask forgiveness and God grants it to us and we accept it gratefully, we are now on the same page. We are now in reciprocity. We are now in ongoing relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.