

“Forgiveness: The Divine Answer”

Date: March 17, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Luke 15:1-10 Occasion, forgiveness series

Theme: Forgiveness, reconciliation

Today is St. Patrick’s Day, so I thought I’d treat you to a couple of Irish jokes. Father Murphy walks into a pub in Donegal and says to the first man he meets, “Do ye want to go heaven?” The man said, “I do, Father.” The priest said, “Then stand over there against the wall.”

The priest asks the second man, “Do ye want to go to Heaven?” “Certainly, Father,” was the man’s reply. “Then stand over there against the wall,” said the priest.

Then Father Murphy walked up to O’Toole and said, “Do ye want to go to Heaven?” O’Toole said, “No, I don’t Father.” The priest said, “I don’t believe this. Ye mean to tell me that when ye die ye don’t want to go to Heaven?”

O’Toole said, “Oh, when I die? I thought ye were getting a group together to go right now.” How about another one?

Gallagher opened the morning newspaper and was dumbfounded to read in the obituary column that he had died. He quickly phoned his friend Finney. “Did ye see the paper?” asked Gallagher. “They say I’ve died.”

“Yes, I saw it,” replied Finney. “Where are ye callin’ from?” Enough!

Another story to get us oriented to today’s message. Six-year-old Brandon decided one Saturday morning to fix his parents pancakes. He found a big bowl and spoon, pulled his chair up to the counter, opened the cupboard and pulled out the heavy flour canister, spilling it on the floor.

He scooped some of the flour into the bowl with his hands, mixed in most of a cup of milk and added some sugar, leaving a floury trail on the

floor, which by now had a few tracks left by his kitten. Brandon was covered with flour and getting frustrated. He wanted this to be something very good for Mom and Dad, but it was getting very bad.

He didn't know what to do next, whether to put it all into the oven, or onto the stove, and he didn't know how the stove worked! Suddenly he saw his kitten licking from the bowl of mix and reached to push her away, knocking the egg carton to the floor. Frantically, he tried to clean up this huge mess but slipped on the eggs, getting his pajamas white and sticky.

And just then, he saw Dad standing in the door. Big crocodile tears welled up in Brandon's eyes. All he had wanted to do was something good, but he'd made a terrible mess. He was sure a scolding was coming, maybe even a spanking. But his father just watched him.

Then, walking through the mess, he picked up his crying son, hugged him and loved him, getting his own pajamas white and sticky in the process! Oh, how he loved his boy! Together they cleaned up the mess and together they made pancakes. And it turned out to be a beautiful breakfast after all.

That's how God deals with us. We try to do something good in life, but it turns into a mess. Our marriage gets all sticky, or we insult a friend, or we can't stand the people we work with at our jobs. Sometimes we just stand there in tears, because we can't think of anything else to do. That's when God picks us up and loves us and forgives us, even though some of our mess gets all over Him. And together, we try again.

David Augsburger writes, "Since nothing we intend is ever flawless, and nothing we attempt ever without error, and nothing we achieve without some measure of finitude and fallibility we call humanness, we are saved by forgiveness."

In our book study on Monday night, we considered a new way of looking at sin. Instead of thinking of it only in terms of breaking laws or disobeying the rules, we were invited to think of sin as missing the mark, or getting off the path which God intends for us. We found it a much more grace-filled way of looking at our mistakes and our wrong-doing.

The fact is: we are human. We're not always going to get it right. We're going to make mistakes, sometimes intentionally but more often than not unintentionally, but we still miss the mark of who God desires us to be. When that happens, we create a separation in the relationship – either in our relationship with God, or with another person, or both.

When God forgives us, God wants to restore us to a good and healthy relationship again. Poor Brandon was afraid his father was going to punish him for making a mess. Isn't that how many of us view God? Angry and ready to punish? But Brandon's father was more interested in his relationship with his son than he is in punishing him for being a six year old.

In Jesus Christ, God comes to give God's self to us in love, seeking to restore that broken relationship that occurs simply because we are human. I invite us to think of God's forgiveness as the means to overcome any estrangement between God and us. God is always inviting us to enter more deeply into relationship with Him. It delights Him.

Consider the two parables in today's Gospel lesson. The meaning of both of them is that God *rejoices* when people return to Him. God is quick to forgive *because* God wants to restore the relationship. God is slow to anger, always offering us another chance. If you thought Brandon's father responded in a loving way, multiply that exponentially to see how much God loves us. For too long we have viewed forgiveness only as an alternative to God's wrath; God changes his mind about punishing us.

I think God is more interested in restoring the relationship. The woman who found her coin, the shepherd who finds his lost sheep – both result in great rejoicing. And so it with God. God’s forgiveness is intended to restore the broken relationship.

When we look at the life of Jesus, we see Jesus offering forgiveness, even when it isn’t asked for – the woman caught in adultery, or the man who was lame, and Jesus tells him “your sins are forgiven, take up your mat and walk.”

What is Jesus doing here – forgiving even before people ask for it? He’s offering proactive forgiveness. Consider one of his final words on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.”

The love of God flows outward to overcome all divisions. The love of God seeks to heal and to make whole, so that all may grow in communion with God and with one another.

Poor little Brandon, he was feeling separated from the love of his father, but his Dad loved him too much to become angry for the mess he had made. Is our God not like this also?

Another story, the author is unknown: One rainy afternoon I was driving along one of the main streets of town, taking those extra precautions necessary when the roads are wet and slick.

Suddenly, my son Matthew spoke up from his relaxed position in the front seat. “Mom, I’m thinking of something.” This announcement usually means he had been pondering something for a while, and now he was ready to expound all that his seven-year old mind had discovered. I was curious.

“What are you thinking?” I asked. “The rain,” he began, is like sin and the windshield wipers are like God, wiping our sins away.” I had goose bumps run up and down my arms. “That’s really Good, Matthew.”

Then my curiosity broke in; how far would this little boy take this revelation? So, I asked, “Do you notice how the rain keeps coming? What does that tell you?”

Matthew didn’t hesitate one moment with his answer. “We keep on sinning, and God just keeps on forgiving us.” Ah, the profound wisdom of children.

God loves us so much, God is not happy with the separation that sin creates. And so God will keep forgiving. I invite you to keep responding to that gracious love. Turn towards the Father’s face and see how much He loves you. Turn away from the things that got you off the path; turn towards the Father’s love. He’s waiting, because He loves you. And he’s ready to help you make pancakes a better way. Amen.