

SECOND READING: Rom 3:21-24

²¹ But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness is given through faith in^(b) Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus
This is the word of the Lord. **THANKS BE TO GOD.**

FIRST READING: 1 John 1:5-2:2

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; 7 but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.
2 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, 2 and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world

This is the word of the Lord. **THANKS BE TO GOD**

“I Believe in...the Forgiveness of Sins” (The Apostles’ Creed)

I found it helpful to this week have had pointed out to me in Rev. Adam Hamilton’s book, “*Creed*”, that WITH the Apostles’ Creed we affirm our belief “*in the forgiveness of sins*”, rather than “*that human beings are sinners!*” The emphasis in this ancient document of Faith is on grace, rather than guilt ¹ That was good for me to hear...uplifting, hopeful, freeing. Of course, it does not take long to realize that to affirm the forgiveness of sins makes the assumption that we are sinners. In fact, OUR affirmation that we believe in the forgiveness of sins doesn’t mean anything if we don’t first understand this. For this reason, today, we give the subject of sin, us as sinners and our need to affirm the forgiveness of sins some consideration.

In Greek, the word for sin is *hamartia*. It means “missing the mark”. It comes out of the language used by archers: just as an archer’s arrow might miss the intended target, we, humans, miss the target of God’s intended way for us in our thoughts, words and deeds. We miss the target by DOING what God does NOT intend for us (sins of commission) or by NOT DOING what God INTENDS for us (sins of omission). We do this because, well because, while we were graciously created to have freedom of choice and God’s intent is for us to choose God’s way, the freedom God has given us is true and pure. That means that we are AS free to make disastrous decisions as we are free to make good ones. Sadly, our pride and love of self is ever so strong and the tendency toward making disastrous decisions often wins out. We humans, individually and corporately, often miss the mark, we sin by engaging in greed, violence, lying, cheating, damaging the creation and committing systemic wrongs like poverty, starvation, inequitable health care, racism, and the list goes on.

Now, many profound thinkers over the years have considered this definition of sin and concluded that the better definition is bigger and more fundamental. It is not simply doing/not doing, saying/not saying, thinking/not thinking in accordance with God’s way. They have defined sin in regard to our relationship to God. It is, they say, us putting other things in the place of God in our lives. Soren Kierkegaard, the famous Danish philosopher, asserts that

¹Adam Hamilton. “*The Creed*” (Nashville: Abingdon Press; 2016),108-128.

*“human beings were made to love God supremely, to center their lives and significance on God above anything else, and build their very identities on God. Anything other than this is sin,”*²
Tim Keller defines sin as *“the despairing refusal to find our deepest identity in our relationship and service to God.”*³

Looking at sin this way, we can see how sin destroys us, personally, socially, cosmically. If our identity is found, for instance, in our families, our nation, our tribe, rather than God... then we will tend toward caring less for OTHER families, nations or tribes. If we live for our race or politics, we will be attracted to racism, nationalism and the demonization of the opposition. And if our identity is found in these other things and then they fail us, we will be locked into bitterness, acting and reacting of it. If we lose our identities through our own failings, we will hate and despise ourselves. We will lose God’s shalom, physically, spiritually, psychologically. Things fall apart...big things, cosmic things. As Paul says in Romans 8, the entire world will be “subject to futility” unable to be put right until WE are put right.

But the absolute amazing thing here, the stunning thing to realize, is that we are not victims...we are sinners. We are sinners. And as weird as this might sound, this is a good thing. It puts us in a position, a position of humility, of openness, a low place without excuse or esteem, wherein we can be put right...not without a Savior, mind you...but yet, we can be put right! There is hope. We are wretched sinners who can claim the hope for a new and unburdened life, a forgiven and free life in Jesus, in Jesus who came for the express purpose of saving us.⁴ It’s a costly, costly gift he’s given us, for he died doing it, but nevertheless it’s a gift, free and clear, allowing us to be respond by reorienting and recentering those wrongly focused identities now completely around him.

I have always enjoyed imagining the catechumens of the early church, those who were converting to the Christian faith. I’ve liked to think of them stepping into the baptismal pools, in their long white gowns. They did this traditionally at dawn on Easter morning. They stepped

² Tim Keller. *“The Reason for God”*. (New York: Viking Publications,2008), 163-179.

³ Tim Keller.

⁴ Tim Keller.

down, down, down into the cool water, recognizing that their past sins were now forgiven. And then as they stepped up, up, up into the warm sunlight they knew that God was promising them, in advance, that their future sins too would be forgiven.

*Adam Hamilton tells of participating in a baptismal service for 51 men and women of Healing House who had chosen to become Christians. Many were former addicts. Some were previously prostitutes. One of the women was baptized with her daughter. She told Adam that her drug addiction led her to lose her home, sleep in her car, and be imprisoned on several occasions. As a result, she had “lost what was most precious to her, her two beautiful children.” At Healing House she found new life. She has her children back and is living sober. She said, **“Being baptized gave me the chance to give my life to Jesus and receive his forgiveness...The best part is, now I get to teach my kids and lead by example how to be a faithful follower of the Lord..(to forgive others as we’ve been forgiven).”**⁵*

Did you hear that? Did you hear it? This is it. This is why we need say, *“I believe in the forgiveness of sins”*. We need hear ourselves say that “we have given our lives, our identities, to Jesus and we have received his forgiveness”. We need remind ourselves in saying it that sin is a destructive, enslaving robber of joy and peace, but that we have been given the gift which leaves that all behind, a new life in exchange for the old, grace and redemption in exchange for the burden of guilt and shame. And we need be reminded that we no longer have to be defined by the worst things we’ve ever done, nor must tomorrow be for us what yesterday was.

Did you also hear her say that the best part now is being able to lead by example by forgiving others”? Did you hear it? That too is it. This also is why we say, *“I believe in the forgiveness of sins.”* We need remember that when others have done something against us, something that by all rights should split us up, they are still God’s children, loved by God as God loves us, and we need let go all that which separates us and nurture a new beginning. We must do this not only to help them be free of their spiritual burden of guilt and shame but to

⁵ Adam Hamilton.

receive the full extent of God's forgiving love for us. If we do not forgive, you see, we are taking upon ourselves chains once again, ones of bitterness and resentment.⁶

Have you noticed how often Jesus forgave people? People asked to be healed, he forgave them; they stumbled and fell, he forgave them; and on the cross his last words? *"Father, forgive them."* This means that we, like Jesus, must forgive the store clerk who short-changes us, the oppressive boss, the friend or family member who betrays us. It means we forgive the coworker who gossips about us, the fellow student who cheats off of us, the church member who puts us down. And yes, as hard as it is, as impossible as it seems, we need forgive those who commit awful atrocities against us. Rev. Bill Carl says, *"When we can forgive even our worst enemy, it is evidence that the regenerative grace of God is transforming our lives, and as we are being more fully transformed, we are becoming more and more open to God's love and forgiveness for us."*⁷

Now, here it is necessary for us to say a word about what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is NOT saying to the person who has wronged us, "No harm done." Forgiveness is not ignoring the consequences, serious consequences for sin. We are not to be doormats who offer the other cheek in order that victimization can reoccur. It is our responsibility to name and stand against the evil and darkness so prevalent in this world. In addition, forgiveness is NOT forgetting. In fact, God is the only one who can remove sin as far as the East is from the West and remember it no more. While we should not let the damage of sin fester in our memory banks, like a bell that we keep ringing, remembering is sometimes needed to protect ourselves from the hurt happening again.

Brothers and sisters, the bottom line here is that we are sinners, who left to our own, will miss the mark, trying to find our identities apart from God. We can't blame it on anyone or anything else. We are not victims, but we are sinners. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, *"Contrary to the medical model, we are not entirely at the mercy of our maladies, and contrary to the legal model, the essence of sin is not **primarily** the violation of laws, but it is a wrecked*

⁶ Adam Hamilton.

⁷ William Carl, *"The Lord's Prayer for Today"* (Louisville: WJKP, 2006), 63.

*relationship with God, with one another, and the whole created order.*⁸ But wonderfully, we are sinners with hope. *“The bad news is bad, but the good news is greater.”*⁹ We need not to be paralyzed by guilt, but we are freed by grace, the salvation offered us...every single one of us.... through the pure and sacrificial, forgiving, love of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. WE can live our lives as forgiven followers of Christ, and we can accept his call to forgive others in kind. What a wonderful thing to be able to now stand and say what we believe using the Apostles’ Creed, affirming as part, that we believe....in the forgiveness of sins!

Let us stand to confess our faith together.

⁸ Barbara Brown Taylor. *“Sermon: Sin: Stuffing Our Souls Empty”*. <https://theologiainvia.wordpress.com/2015/09/28/sin-stuffing-our-souls-empty/>. (accessed 7-13-23).

⁹ Anon.