

“FORGIVING” GOD

Today’s message title – the words at the top of my page that you only see when my sermon gets posted to the web – might almost be considered blasphemous. My sermon for this Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost is called, “Forgiving God.” And I want to say, right off the bat, that I know this is a ridiculous title.

God doesn’t need my forgiveness – He never does anything wrong! He is not a sinner. His ways are just – His actions are loving – He is, in every way worthy of nothing but praise, honor and worship. He saved me – when I was lost in transgressions and sins. He offers me the free gift of eternal life, and He did it by sending His only begotten Son into the flesh to die my death. I know God doesn’t need my forgiveness – that He always does the right thing. Up here, I know it. And I believe it.

But last week when I heard the news that my 45-year old friend, Pastor Peter Kelm, had passed away, I wasn’t feeling it so much down here. I won’t kid you. I don’t understand this particular action of God. It is, in almost every way, a puzzle to me why my Lord would take one whose gifts and talents far exceed my own – whose list of accomplishments and lives impacted by his ministry is far larger than most – whose young family, kids still pre-college, seem to need his fatherly wisdom, his loving support, his guidance and insight – I don’t understand why God would take him and not choose to take someone else – or no one else. He is, after all, God. He can do anything. There is not, I doubt, some requirement that a person die.

And so, today, there is conflict in me. I trust and believe in my God, but I do not like this particular choice. I am confident that God works all things together for the good, but I am more than a little disappointed that my friend is gone – that I can’t go out with him for a coffee, for chicken wings and a beer – that I won’t be discussing ministry to the Karenni, the weals and woes of the South Wisconsin District, or my own joys or struggles in ministry with him any longer. And so, inside, I must admit, I feel a twinge of – dare I call it – anger against God?? Resentment? Frustration? Whatever it may be. And it wants to grab me and drag me down. It wants to do to me what the Serpent did to Eve in the Garden of Eden and say, “Did God really say He loved you? If so, then why did He take your friend away?”

Have you ever felt that angst?

You might feel that way also if you happened to share the misfortune of Floridians or Texans. Plenty of them were praying, “Lord, may this storm dissipate – head away from inhabited land – not cause flooding and damage and even loss of life.” We know God heard these prayers. We know many of them were offered in faith. And yet, there’s the water – and the consequent water damage. And there’s the winds. And the consequent “blown apart,” “blown away,” “in shambles.” Or, even worse, maybe it was your son or daughter who didn’t make it to safety – or maybe it was your parents whose home was destroyed – or maybe you were related to one of those elderly folks in that wretched nursing home where numerous patients died cause the air conditioning didn’t work.

And the inner voice chimes in again. “Didn’t God say He would take care of you? Look at your house – your possessions. Shattered. Where is the son that you once had.” And something inside feels, just a bit, like you have a claim against God – like He should say, “I’m sorry.”

Old Testament Joseph, from our first Lesson, certainly could have felt this way, couldn’t he? And in an even greater way than me, for sure. Here I am lamenting my inability to have a coffee with someone, that someone who I know is in glory ... and he’s got a God who allowed 10 brothers to sell him into slavery, a woman to falsely accuse him of rape, a prison friend who fails to come through on a promise, and a world that seems to be against him at nearly every turn. For years he labored and struggled, not knowing where God would lead.

Certainly he could have lifted his hands to the heavens and said, “It’s not fair Lord! It’s not right! I’ve been faithful, honest, and I’ve lived my life to honor You. And THIS is what I get?”

Or Moses, “Lord, why do **I** have to wander for forty years? I’m not the one who grumbled. I’m not the one who questioned. I could have stayed in Midian and lived out my days in peace, but here I am doing what **you** called me to do. Have you abandoned me?”

Elijah: “Lord, evil King Ahab seems to prosper, while your prophets are being slaughtered.”

Job: “Lord, I was faithful to you when my flocks, my servants, and even my children were taken. But now these festering sores on my body. I am wracked with pain all the day long.”

Yes, without question there are those days of inner conflict – when we know God is faithful and just, and yet, if He were a human we might just want to say to Him, “How could you?”

But look at the actual words of Joseph, years later, as his brothers fear retribution – as they feel certain that Joseph’s kindness only amounted to the fact that he was waiting for their father to die before he let out his wrath. But what does he say?

“Don't be afraid. Brothers, am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.’ And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.”

WOW! Not only was he wise enough to see that his struggles came not as a result of God’s injury but because of the fallenness of humanity and the specific sin of his brothers. But then he actually has the faith grasp that God managed, in His Divine wisdom and goodness, to use their sin toward a greater and grander purpose: that the descendants of Jacob might survive.

Joseph believed God love over and above any evidence to the contrary. He trusted in God’s promises over and above any seeming inconsistencies, contradictions, disappointments. Because He knew God as the One who promised deliverance, salvation, eternity. And so he lifted his head high and declared, in his mind, perhaps words like those recorded in hymn 719. Turn to it with me.

“I leave all things to God’s direction; He loves me both in joy and woe. His will is good, sure His affection; His tender love is true, I know. My fortress and my rock is He; What pleases God, that pleases me.”

God knows what must be done to save me; His love for me will never cease. Upon His hands He did engrave me With purest gold of loving grace. His will supreme must ever be: what pleases God, that pleases me.

What pleases God, that pleases me: whether in joy or sorrow, in peace or pain, in prosperity or adversity.” Joseph’s faith in the Provider rises above it all.

I hate to keep using Pippa as a sermon illustration, but I cannot help but share this one. On Monday I was watching her, and while we were playing in our yard, those Naturescape fertilization people came and gave a treatment to the church's yard and to mine. And when they were done, they plunked those little signs in the ground, "Don't walk on this ground until 48 hours are done or you will die." Well how do you explain weed-killer and lawn treatment to a 16 month old who loves playing in the grass?

"Pippa, today's lesson is nitrogen." WRONG. You try to explain. You say the words. But, for the rest of the day when Pippa wanted to run around in the yard or swing on our little swing or slide on our little slide, I had to say "no." And sometimes she didn't really want to take "no" for an answer. But the best answer WAS "no." And she just had to trust me. She cried a little. She whined some. She squirmed. She twisted. But I was firm.

And our God is firm too. Firm enough not to waver when it comes to His good and gracious plans. It doesn't matter if we are bucking and screaming, weary and tired, lonely and afraid. While compassionate and loving, He will not be dissuaded from continuing with His plans to lead us, and others, toward eternal joy. With Joseph, He knew, that his difficult journey would bring change to his brothers and rescue to the people of Israel. And, maybe He knows that if Pastor Kelm doesn't go through cancer, that one of his children or future grandchildren might wander from the faith. Maybe He knows that someone else might come to know the joy of Jesus through the witness of Pastor Kelm as he goes through the struggle.

The faithful lift their eyes to the heavens, and when they are puzzled, distressed, anxious, or distraught over the events of the day, they say, "I believe. I believe in the One Who created this world. I believe in the One who suffered for me, who carried my sins, who died my death, and who rose so that I might have a future. I believe, because if He did all that for me, then I am ready to lay down any claims I may think I have against Him – and TRUST.

And maybe the faithful can take it one step further and not make the mistake of the man in our Gospel parable. Maybe he can look at the injuries he has received at the hands of others, the debts that are owed him, the transgressions that seemingly give him cause to turn away from his neighbor in anger, retribution, hatred and instead say, "how dare I stake my claim against that one, when my God could have done the same to me AND DIDN'T. No, He forgave me. He saved me. He loved me when I was unlovable, rescued me when I was beyond hope. And that's the way He wants me to treat others: with generosity, with grace, with mercy.

And soon, maybe the irreverent and blasphemous title takes on a different tone. Instead of “forgiving God” – as if He has done something wrong and needs MY generosity. It rather become “Forgiving God” – that is, as He is characterized by grace, and when I am linked to Him, I can be too.

Joseph says it: “I forgive you.” Jesus said it: “I forgive you.” Maybe today’s the day that we need to say it too. But it won’t flow from our own strength of character. No. It will flow from the forgiving God, who opens our hands and softens our hearts as we declare: “Help me, Lord, when it’s hard. Help me, Lord, when the Tempter seeks to lead me astray. Help me, Lord, to believe. Help me, Lord, to forgive. Help me, Lord, to love.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.