May 21, 2017   
Psalm 103:1-18   
How Do We Love Ourselves? Accept Forgiveness

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Psalm 103:1-18 (UMH 824) New Revised Standard Version

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits— who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s. The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust. As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.

This past week I was in San Antonio for the largest gathering of Protestant preachers in the nation. This was the 25th year of the Festival of Homiletics and there were 1800 Episcopalians, Lutherans, Baptists, UCC, United Methodist, and more preachers from all over the world gathered in San Antonio. I met preachers from Australia, Seattle, New Jersey, Canada, and Kansas City. All week we listened to other preachers preach. It was amazing. I heard Bishop Yvette Flunder of the Fellowship of Affirming Ministries share these words, “You don't learn from your successes, you learn from the messiness of your messes.” Church should be safe for our full, messy humanity. Church should not be the place where we play dress-up and pretend.

Bishop Flunder told a story about visiting a perfect church. Of course, the room full of preachers laughed when she said that there was a perfect church because churches are made up of imperfect preachers and imperfect church members. The church is not perfect.

When I was growing up I loved going to church because everyone was so nice and people were always hugging and everyone was so kind and polite. When I started to work in the church I quickly realized that the church was made up of people who were mean, people who hurt, and people who said painful things and did painful things to others. The church was just like the world. It is like that old saying, “the church is not a museum for saints, but a hospital for sinners.” So, Bishop Flunder went to this perfect church, and it was perfect because there were no carpet stains, the building was immaculate. And Bishop Flunder turned to the pastor and asked him, “Where will the homeless sit?” I hope that at Greenland Hills we would show Bishop Flunder our carpet stains and she would hear the children running through the halls and she would see the homeless sitting right next to the financially secure.

Last week we started a new sermon series where we think about how we love ourselves. How do we love ourselves? Loving ourselves begins with loving ourselves as God loves us. God loves us so much. God loves you, and God loves me. The next step is accepting forgiveness. You may think that there is nothing that you need forgiveness for, and I would encourage you to think about how you would feel when the homeless person enters our church. Would you greet them or would you look away?

The Apostle Paul in Romans 3:23 tells us that we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We are all broken. And that is hard for some of us to deal with. As the great hymn “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” says, “Prone to wander Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.”

To be authentic and real with God, we cannot to live in alternative facts. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Sin is not something that we have overcome. We are broken and we can’t put enough bandages on our wounds to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps or to just feel better. And I know it is uncomfortable to talk about our brokenness. But, here in church we have to talk about stuff that we don’t want to talk about.

We are broken and we need mended back together again. The psalmist wants us to know in our bones that God is merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. That is God’s nature. God forgives us. But we live in fear, we rationalize, we think that what we have done is okay, or we think that it is unforgiveable. So, we hold it in, we live in guilt, we live in shame, and we keep back a part of our heart from God. Joel 2:12-13 urges us to give our whole heart to God because God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

Have you ever done something wrong and you live with that hanging over you? Have you ever been so filled with remorse and you need to be released from that? You need to feel like you have been acquitted. There are things in my life that I have done that will come to my mind at different times of the day. While I am driving to work I will remember that thing that I did that I have asked God to forgive me for so many times, and I have to remind myself that God has forgiven me and I have to accept God’s forgiveness. For me accepting God’s forgiveness is something that I have to do again and again.

Accepting forgiveness is so hard for me because I struggle with accepting God’s love. How am I good enough to receive this unmerited, undeserved love? When we are growing up we hear over and over again to be a good girl or be a good boy. The implication is that when we mess up, when we don’t clean up our room, when we don’t share our toys, when we aren’t nice to the new kid in school, we are not good. We are bad.

I remember when I learned that in the Roman Catholic tradition you had to go to Confession before you could receive Communion. I was so glad that we didn’t do that in the church that I grew up in because I couldn’t remember all of the bad things that I had done. I couldn’t remember all of the things that I had done wrong. I couldn’t remember all of the things that I needed forgiveness for, because I felt like if I wrote it all down, it would fill a book. And that would be for just one day.

But confession to God is important. Being a part of a church family helps me know that I am loved and accepted by God. We confess our sins as a family of faith. Turn in your hymnal to page 7. I proclaim your forgiveness of sin because I am your pastor. You proclaim the forgiveness of my sin because you are my church family. You represent God for me. When we talk about forgiveness whether it is giving it or receiving it, reconciliation happens. It can be reconciliation between us and other people or reconciliation between us and God.

God forgives us when we do something wrong. I don’t ever want to be so consumed by guilt that I miss the opportunity to share love. I don’t ever want to be so weighed down by my sins that I miss the opportunity to read to my kids, to check on my neighbor, or the opportunity to visit someone in the hospital.

People often judge us by our used to be. If you haven't seen someone in a long time, don't assume they are still where you left them, because God changes people! The same is true for us. God changes us because God’s forgiveness makes us better. It makes us trust again. God’s mercy helps us to extend forgiveness, grace, and mercy to others.

So I want to invite us to a time of confession and forgiveness. I want to invite you if possible to put both of your feet on the floor and put your palms down on your legs. Pay attention to your breath, breathe in and out, breathing in the love of God, breathing out all of the to-do lists, breathing in the love of God, breathing out the ways that you have fallen short, breathing in the love of God, breathing out the other things that you need to let go of. Breathing in the love of God, breathing out the things in your past or in your present that you can’t let go off. Let them go and breath in the love of God. Come into your breath. Let your exhalation be your confession, let go of that which draws you away from God.

You have confessed your sins before God. Now I want you to turn your palms up to receive the forgiveness of God. Hear God saying to you, you are my beloved child with whom I am well pleased, I love you. I forgive you not seven times but 77 times. I love you. I love you. Amen and Amen.