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“Forgiveness”

A sermon by Sam R. Miglarese

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

August 2, 2015

2 Samuel 11:26–12:13a; Ephesians 4:1–16; John 6:24–35

Forgiveness holds a central place in the Christian story. At each and every worship service, we always begin with a confession of our sins. Today, it was in the very words of David, a sinner, in the famous Psalm 51: “Have mercy on me, O God... wash me from my iniquity” (Psalm 51:1–2). After we make our confession, we hear the prophetic word of forgiveness where the church proclaims that we are truly a forgiven people as we confess, honestly and forthrightly, our need for God’s mercy.

Throughout the course of our lives, we have witnessed some extraordinary moments of grace when it comes to forgiveness. I remember in 1983 when Pope John Paul II went to Rebibbia prison to give forgiveness to the man who was his would-be assassin. It caused quite a stir: cover page of *Time* magazine, everybody was aghast, what does this mean—unmerited forgiveness. And then just recently in Charleston, SC, we witnessed the horror of the massacre of the Emanuel Nine. We were appalled, we were angry. And then within a very short few days, the family of the Emanuel Nine announced in court to the man who was the assassin, “We forgive you.” That moment of grace touched us all profoundly and hopefully gives us the courage to be a forgiving people as well.

All of these unmerited merciful moments were, for me, captured in the play, the novel, and the film, *Les Miserables*. We know and love the story, the music; here is Jean Valjean, down on his luck, who is given shelter and hospitality by the bishop.

But as he is leaving, he couldn't help but steal the bishop's silverware. He is caught, brought back to the bishop, and the bishop rightly could have asked for justice, but instead, he said, "Jean, you forgot these silver candlesticks." In that act of generosity, in that act of forgiveness, that transforming moment of grace, it led him throughout the course of that convoluted story to be a man of mercy, a man who made differences in peoples' lives as they experienced hard luck in post-revolution France.

We heard in Ephesians the author pleading with and appealing to all of us to live a life worthy of our calling. If you go back to the first three chapters of Ephesians and listen to the ways in which we are a called people, we will identify with the true blessing that is ours. In Christ, we have redemption, we have forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. It is one of the many ways in which we are a gifted people. All through those chapters of Ephesians, we are gifted, and we revel in the delight that we are through Christ Jesus our Lord.

When we get to chapter 4, he changes gears. Instead of saying who we are as a called people, he tells us what is expected of us and begs of us and appeals to us to live a life worthy of the calling to which we have received. We have just heard some of those qualities. One which speaks to me in light of the story of David that we heard in the Old Testament lesson is speaking the truth in love.

The story of David and Bathsheba and Uriah is a familiar one. It has been captured on film numerous times. It is a story that teaches us something powerful about forgiveness and God's grace, but also about the arrogance of power. It is not a pretty story, and you've heard part of it before Nathan confronts David. David takes advantage of his power and authority as the absolute King of Israel. He commits adultery with Bathsheba, wants to rid Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, so he is free to bring her into his harem. He makes that happen because of his authority. And all of a sudden, he seems to be unaware of his violation, not only as king, but his violation of the covenant with God.

This is not simply a story of lust. It's a story of greed, corruption, arrogance of power, abuse of power. You name the ways in which these actions fit into a

contemptible series of lies. Nathan, who is part of the whole prophetic office of God's covenant, is asked by God to go speak to David, to confront and challenge David. I'm sure he must have done that with a little bit of trepidation, to be the whistle-blower, so to speak. He does so by telling the story about two men in a certain city, one rich, one poor; one with many flocks of lamb and one with only one that is dear to his family. He fed it out of his meager fare, he lay with him in his bosom; it was like a daughter to him. But then a traveler comes along, the rich man needs food to provide hospitality, but he is loathe to use one of his own flock. So what does he do? He takes the poor man's lamb and prepared that for the guests who had come to him.

David was rightly angry when he heard this story, and he said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die!" And then Nathan said to David, "You are that man." And he reminds him that "you were anointed King, that God has given you to be master of His home, you had been entrusted with the responsibility of the kingdom, so why have you despised the Word of the Lord?"

That is a powerful statement: "You have despised me, and you have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife." And then David, in response to Nathan in this confrontation, comes to his senses, recognizes that he violated not only his commitment to his people, but also violated the very covenant with God. He was unfaithful, and he said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan said, "The Lord has put away your sin. You shall not die."

It is a powerful story of forgiveness and the transforming influence it had, and if Psalm 51 is any indication, it really did change the way the powerful king lived out in repentance his sinfulness. There are some real lessons here for us, the first of which is the fact that Nathan, in challenging David, did not scold him or list a series of moral tirades or didn't become judgmental. He helped him understand in terms of his own witness to himself that he was a sinful man. Within his own heart, he was able to recognize the need for repentance. He was inner motivated, and I think that is a pattern upon which I hope that we can model in the way in which we come to grips with sin in our own lives.

Secondly, we notice that David said, "I have sinned against the Lord." He didn't

say, “I sinned against Bathsheba” or “I sinned against Uriah” or “I sinned against my people.” He sinned against the Lord. It helps us remember that sin is the violation of our relationship with God, and in our relationship with one another, with other persons, when we sin against other persons, we are, in fact, sinning against our God. We need to be reminded of that, that when David said, “I have sinned against the Lord,” our sins, petty and large though they may be, affecting the other, really and truly are against God.

Finally, to acknowledge ourselves as in the wrong, as David did in his confrontation with Nathan, and to recognize ourselves as a recipient of God’s gracious forgiveness, I believe, like Jean Valjean, leaves open possibilities for change and a chance for new beginnings in our lives, not only as individuals, but maybe more importantly as an institutional church that consistently believes there is a prophetic role that we play in speaking out in truth and in love to the world to which we serve. The power of forgiveness in the life of David and in our lives has the potential to transform us all.