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“The Impossible Possibility of Forgiveness”

A sermon by Sam R. Miglarese

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

June 12, 2016

2 Samuel 11:26 – 12:10, 13-15; Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36 – 8:3

Thank you, Amy! Thank you, Homer! Thank you, Steve! The Proclaimed Word came alive for us today. We are very, very grateful. Thank you!

Several weeks ago, our new pastor invited her program staff to an all-morning retreat in Walltown, guests of Michael Honeycutt at the Walltown recreation center. While we were there after our devotional and before we got into the business of planning for the church year, Mindy asked us what our impressions were of First Presbyterian Church. She invited us also to share with one another our vision of serving the gospel of Jesus. I was impressed with my colleagues because they really wanted the gospel that they were called to serve to be a gospel that was authentic, real, effective, and genuine, and not a gospel of superficialities or pretty words or sentimental slush or any kind of language that would capture “pie in the sky by and by.”

I was reminded of this descriptive passage of sentimental slush that Herman Melville used in his novel *Pierre* to describe the gospel of love. He wrote, “The gospel of love is a volume bound in rose-leaves, clasped with violets, and by the beaks of hummingbirds printed with peach-juice on the leaves of lilies.” You just heard the gospel read and proclaimed, and believe me, no peach juice or rose lilies was embodied in that word.

We heard a gospel, and we heard a reading from Samuel and Galatians that speaks

of two important prophets, Nathan and Jesus, as well as four unsavory sinners:

- David—adultery and murder. Despicable, really.
- Paul—the one who wrote that magnificent passage about justification by faith apart from the works of the law. He began his selection from Galatians with these words: “You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it.” (Galatians 1:13). And **now** he speaks about Christ living in him and him living in Christ.
- The sinful woman—many sins. Everybody knew she was a woman of ill-repute, except Jesus who did not get that memo or chose to ignore it.
- Simon—the Pharisee had invited Jesus in his home. He was inhospitable, arrogant, judgmental, and self-righteous. He could see other peoples’ sins, but he couldn’t see his own.

Let me reflect with you for a moment on David and on the dinner party that Simon prepared for Jesus.

The selection you heard from 2 Samuel deals with Nathan’s confrontation with King David. It goes without saying that God was displeased and disgusted with the behavior of David. He sends his prophet to speak to him. Nathan was smart enough to realize that you do not challenge someone who has the absolute right of kings with direct confrontation. He uses a strategy used by playwrights—looking from the outside in at a human situation. Maybe this would make David less defensive. He tells the story of the poor man having his little lamb, his treasure, being taken by the rich man for a dinner party which he was having for a guest. David was rightly very angry, even to the point where he says the man deserved death. And then you heard the words of the prophet, who stands back and says, “**You are the man.**”

Then Nathan recounts all the sins of David. And David finally comes to recognition and realization that he was the man, and that he was the one who had sinned against the Lord, that he had violated that relationship, that covenant with God.

And so do we. We need the prophet Nathan in our lives to remind us, as we look in the mirror, of our need for God's grace and forgiveness.

In the dinner party that Simon threw, a woman crashes the party. She must have already experienced the healing hand of Jesus, and she comes in, lies at his feet, and with ointment and with tears in her eyes, she washes his feet and dries them with her hair. Simon, clearly disgusted with her behavior because everyone knew she was a sinner, says in an aside that Jesus picked up on, "Is he a prophet? Doesn't he realize what kind of woman she is?"

Jesus, like Nathan did for David, tells a story. Jesus tells a story about the creditor, about the debt that two men had—500 for one and 50 silver pieces for the other—and the creditor forgave them both. Which one, Jesus says, loves the most? And Simon says, "Well, I suppose the one who was forgiven the most." Jesus said, "Yes, this woman has many sins, but she loves the most." And he went on to describe, as you heard, the ways in which her love, her lavish hospitality, was magnificent compared to Simon's. Each and every one of us are called upon, as we do each and every Sunday in the Confession of Sin, to acknowledge our need for mercy and our need for forgiveness and to hear the declaration of forgiveness. The debts that have been laid upon us 500-fold have been taken away, and that we have been, as you heard in Galatians, justified by grace alone apart from the works of the law, apart from our own efforts and initiatives and good will. We have been forgiven much ... "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" ...

As we move into a deeper understanding of forgiveness, I hope we can appreciate the power of the gospel that is alive, that is full of meaning and power, a gospel that is not superficial but full of meaning and depth. Walter Brueggemann shares this thought about forgiveness: "Forgiveness is an emancipation from the fear, shame, guilt and self-hatred to a new freedom." Look at Paul, David, and the sinful woman—they speak with gratitude of the new freedom that forgiveness brings.

Very shortly, we are all going to witness the baptism of **Julia**. I have a word for **Gray and Amy** as they begin to bring forward their daughter for baptism in the presence of this community of faith. The children will gather around the font, and

our pastor will ask the children if they are willing to help Julia up if she ever falls down. It is always a touching moment for me because it captures the pattern of our lives, our Christian journey, for when we fall down, we need help to get up; we die, and we rise, all experienced in the life-giving waters of baptism.

So I encourage you, on this day, to recognize the ways in your life you have stumbled and fallen and have experienced the grace of God's life and forgiveness, power, and energy, and that you will inculcate in the life of Julia.

There is a great selection from *Grendel* by John Gardner that captures our expectations for the power of the sacrament of baptism. It's a retelling of the epic story *Beowulf* through the eyes and viewpoint of Grendel, the monster. Grendel reflects on his secretly watching the priests in front of the temple doing their rituals, and he says:

There is no conviction in the old priests' songs; there is only showmanship. No one in the kingdom is convinced that the gods have life in them. The weak observe the rituals—take their hats off, put them on again, raise their arms, lower their arms, moan, intone, press their palms together—but no one harbors unreasonable expectations. (John Gardner, *Grendel*, New York: Random House (Vintage Books edition), 1989, p. 128)

He cynically refers to the fact that these rituals are rituals of the uncommitted. But today, we rejoice with you because you are parents who are committed in your faith. I encourage you, as you place your child before our pastors for baptism, that you always and everywhere **be unreasonable in your expectations** for the power of God in her life and in your lives. Be unreasonable in your expectations of God's grace.

Influences: Herman Melville
John Gardner
Walter Brueggeman
Bob Duggan
Regis Duffy