

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Too Good to Be Saved

Luke 18:9-14

Sunday, August 28, 2022

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Have you ever wished Jesus had done and said things a bit differently? He would be less offensive – his teachings more palatable.

I remember teaching a Sunday School class on the seven deadly sins. Somehow a lady in the class started railing against alcohol. A gentleman in the group said, “Well, don’t forget Jesus’ first miracle in John was turning big barrels of water into wine so a party would continue.” And the angry lady replied, “Yeah, and I have never been able to forgive Jesus for doing that!”

I remember a man interested in joining another church I served. He didn’t know much about the Christian faith. Didn’t grow up in the church. I told him to read the gospel of Luke. He came back to me a couple of weeks later. “I thought Christianity was an easy, feel good religion. What’s all this stuff about forgiving enemies, losing yourself, and taking up a cross? This is hard. I just wanted a little spirituality, some nice supportive people in my life. No, thank you. And the stories he told? For goodness sake!”

I had a professor who remembers being invited to preach in a church in North Georgia and his text was the parable of the prodigal son. In his sermon he said that God frustrates the proud and gives grace and forgiveness to the humble sinner.

After the service, my professor was taken to lunch by a prominent attorney in that church and his wife. As they were eating their meal, he said, “I really don’t know whether to say I didn’t like your sermon or I didn’t like the text. It is easier to say I didn’t like your sermon because my wife doesn’t like for me to speak against the Bible.”

My professor said, “Well, please speak freely. What’s your problem?” He said, “Well, it’s receiving that boy back home and having a party for him.” My professor said, “Well, what do you think should’ve happen?” He said, “He should’ve been arrested. He broke the law, and ruined the family, lived with Gentiles and pigs, that was against the law. He should’ve been arrested.” My professor said, “And given a mandatory sentence?” Lawyer said, “Yes, at least six years.” The man was serious!

So, my professor decided that the next time he preached on the prodigal son he would fix the story. A few years later he had the opportunity to preach on the prodigal son again and he decided to fix it. He said, “There was a man who had two sons, the older son stayed home, did his Father’s bidding, worked hard on the farm. The younger son took his money and wasted it in a far country, came into hard times, decided he should come home, confess his wrong. Well, when the younger son drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing and he called one of the servants and said, “What is going on?”

And the servant said, “Well, you know your older brother stayed here and worked and did the right thing. And your father appreciates him. So, he is throwing him a party.”

He couldn’t even speak the first word of his sermon before some lady in the back of the sanctuary yelled, “That’s the way it should’ve been, preacher!”

Yeah, Jesus could’ve made things a lot easier for himself and for us if he had just changed some of the words he said. But what he said is what he said. It’s right in the Bible, as clear as day.

Take our text for today. That’s another tough one. Two men went to the Temple to pray. One of them was a Pharisee, a person committed to the Law, reading it, studying it and praying it. He tithed ten percent of all he had for the poor and needy. He prayed and fasted routinely, and was morally and ceremonially clean, unlike adulterers, thieves, and other brutal criminals. Or like this tax collector, praying next to him. He was a good, religious, person.

But the other guy praying, well he was a terrible person. He was a traitor. Took money from his own people to pay the Roman Government. Had no character or integrity. He knew he was such an awful person that when he was in the Temple praying he really didn’t know how to pray, didn’t know what to do, where to look. All he knew to do was to beat his chest and say, “Lord, have mercy on me.” And Jesus said he went home justified.

Now, this is a difficult story for those of us who feel good about believing in God, coming to church, having good morals and values, and being good examples for our kids. This story is hard to swallow. So, what we have done to make this story more acceptable is to demonize the Pharisee. We make him the terrible character. We try to see him as a self-righteous, judgmental bigot. He is cruel, condescending, and treats others harshly. The text doesn't say that, but that's what we like to think.

But the other guy, the tax collector, we need to see him as a nice guy who is just misunderstood. He is like a guy who works in a tattoo parlor and says, "I am glad I am not like those self-righteous religious folks who judge people." When customers come in to get a tattoo, he listens to their problems and relates to them and understands how they feel like outsiders too.

Now the text doesn't imply any of those things, but we work all this out in our minds because this way it makes sense to us why he would go home justified, rather than that self-righteous, religious bigot.

Why do we do this? Why do we have to try to fix these stories in our minds? Because so many of Jesus' stories are offensive. And quite often they are offensive because Jesus gives grace and forgiveness to people who we think don't deserve it. Yes, yes, as we sit in church we may be able to hold that nice thought in our minds that God forgives everyone. But most of the time, if we are honest, we often think people ought to get what's coming to them!

So, when we hear the stories of the father with two sons and these two men who went into Temple, we are uncomfortable, even offended, because Fred Craddock says they have to do with that extremely difficult subject of forgiveness. It is hard to understand forgiveness, and even harder to do it.

Remember that terrible event some years ago when a disturbed man went into an Amish school and started shooting? Five young girls were killed and many were wounded. The perpetrator was also killed. And how did that Amish community respond? They forgave the man! They went to the perpetrator's funeral and comforted his widow? I also understand they gave money so his kids could go to college!

Now that is shocking, isn't it? Even for those of us who are Christians. That just doesn't happen. That can't happen. You can't just forgive someone like that, right?

I recall a man in another church I served who was sent to prison for a crime he committed. He was a well loved and respected man and folks were shocked at what he did. They couldn't believe it. Well, he did his time. Went to counselors, rehab, the whole nine yards. He apologized to everyone, sought to make amends with everyone. But folks still had a hard time forgiving him for what he did – the way he destroyed his family and his relationships with people. They felt betrayed. He came to me and told me that he paid his penance, did his time, asked for forgiveness, and really had changed. He said, "I don't understand why they won't love and accept me like before. Why can't they forgive me?"

Forgiveness is hard. The thinking is "Once a cheater, always a cheater. Once a liar, always a liar. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. They don't deserve a second chance."

Forgiveness is hard. It is one of the most difficult, if not the most difficult thing Jesus calls us to do. And so, it is almost impossible to believe that people really truly do it.

And why is that? Well, Fred Craddock says it is because folks who have been wronged or betrayed get a lot of unsolicited advice from friends and family. "Don't you ever forgive him. Instead, pretend that you have forgiven him but keep bringing it up every once in a while and you will have power over that jerk. For as long as you're married, you'll have that power."

Of course, Craddock says, you will have other folks who give you the opposite advice. "Who are you to judge? Nobody is perfect. We are all human for the love of Pete. Give him a break. We all make mistakes."

A colleague of mine knows a woman whose husband cheated on her, had an affair. She decided to go home to live with her mom for a while. She stayed there about six weeks. In that time, she spoke with her husband from time to time. One day she decided to back home. Her mother couldn't believe it.

"Why in the world would you do that? After all that he has done to you?"

"I know it Mom, but I have decided to forgive him. I love him and forgive him."

"You what?!"...

“Well, I never thought my own daughters would condone adultery!”

“Mom, I didn’t say I condone it. I said I forgive him.”

“Well,” her mom said, “It looks the same to me. Now what are other people going to say? People are going to talk you know.”

“Okay, mom what are they going to say?”

“One thing they are going to say is that you are soft on sin. Sweetheart, the way you prove you’re not soft on sin is never forgive anybody for anything. Show your moral courage then everyone will know you stand for what is right!”

That’s the thing about not forgiving. People can always say they are being tough on sin, being righteous and holy about it. But, is it really righteous and holy to never forgive?

But it is very hard to forgive. Remember that time Jesus was teaching and his disciples interrupted his sermon and said, “Increase our faith, teacher. We can’t do what you are asking us to do?” Do you remember what Jesus was talking about? “Even if someone sins against you, repents and asks forgiveness, you are to forgive them seven times a day, and if you follow me, you will do it.” The disciples, “Well, we can’t do it unless you increase our faith.”

Forgiveness is hard. And you know why I think it is difficult? Craddock suggested it is because people think that when someone does something awful, terrible, there are only two choices. One option is to say, “Well, nobody is perfect. You don’t know what’s behind it. We are all human, cut them some slack. How bad is it really?”

The second option is to just be rigid. Stand firm against sin. Just nail them against the wall. That’s justice. No compromise. You start down that road and it is a slippery slope. Look what the world is coming to!

I know people who choose the second option and take bitter feelings with them to the grave. They were done wrong by someone and became bitter and they remained bitter the rest of their lives. They died angry, bitter people in the name of pride and pseudo-righteousness.

James Merritt tells the true story about a 94-year-old lady he knew by the name of Hazel who never married. She remained bitter her whole life about not being married. She was active in her church, and when she died, the pastor planned her funeral with specific written instructions from Hazel. She had listed the songs that

were to be sung, the scriptures read, and who was to speak. Her final instructions were as follows: “There will be no male pall bearers. They wouldn’t take me out when I was alive and I don’t want them to take me out when I’m dead!”

And it is easy to shake our head at people like that until we have been hurt, betrayed, cheated on, or treated harshly. For it is easy to sit in judgment on people about forgiveness when we are not the ones who have been hurt. We can wax theologically and biblically all day long about forgiveness. We have the luxury of being outside of it and being philosophical about it.

But the only person who can truly forgive is the one who has been violated – who has been wounded by another. That’s the only one who can say I forgive you. That’s the only one who can say, “I am choosing not to carry this anger and poison of hatred in my life anymore. I want to be free from that burden.”

You see, when we are hurt by another, we don’t only have two options. Forgiveness, true forgiveness is another matter altogether.

Lewis Smedes tells the story of Frederick and Hilda. They lived Holland. Frederick was the baker in the community. Every morning he would get up early and go to the bakery to prepare the baked goods for the day. This was his habit and routine. When the bread was finished, he would go back home and have breakfast with Hilda.

Frederick was a model person in the community, elder in the church, and good citizen. One day when he went back home, he found someone else in the bed with Hilda. It devastated him, as you can imagine. And in the small town in which they lived, you could not keep a thing like this quiet. So, everyone found out about it. But Frederick made it known quickly that he was going to forgive Hilda. Instead of making her an outcast, he said, “I forgive you.” But Frederick did not mean it. He said it with his lips, not with his heart. He said it with his mind, not his soul. Inside he resented her and he made her feel guilty every day.

An angel in heaven saw all this going on, and each time Frederick looked at Hilda in a resentful way, the angel put a pebble in Frederick’s heart. As months went by, there were so many pebbles in his heart that he could not walk upright—he walked stooped over.

He told the doctors to take away his pain, but they could not do it.

One day, Frederick cried out to God, “Take away my pain!” An angel appeared to him and said, “The pain will go away, but to get rid of it you must have MAGIC EYES.” Frederick said, “How do I get magic eyes?” The angel said, “You have to look at Hilda, not as a woman who is wicked—who betrayed you, but as a needy woman who loves you very much. You must begin to see her as God sees her.” He said, “I can’t do it.” And the pain continued.

Finally, one day out of desperation, he began to see Hilda forgivingly as a woman who was needy. When he did, a pebble would leave his heart. Over the days, weeks, and months, the pebbles left his heart, and he began to see Hilda differently. He walked straight again. He invited Hilda back into his life and they began a new life together as Frederick received magic eyes. Forgiveness is magic eyes.

You see, forgiveness is not denying the hurt that we have received. It is not denying that the offense was wrong. It is having the eyes to see that there is more to the offender than the offense.

How do you get those magic eyes? Well, I don’t have all the answers, but I think a good place to start just might be at the foot of the cross where Jesus showed us, rather astoundingly, that there is more to us than our offenses.

Let those who have ears to hear, hear.

-Fred Craddock’s sermon “Looking Around During the Prayer” was a helpful resource for me as I prepared this sermon.

Devotional Guide:

Monday – Read Matthew 18:15-18. In this passage Jesus gives some very practical advice on how to handle conflict with others. Notice how Jesus directs us to go directly to the person who has “sinned against us” and work it out. Imagine how much heartache and pain would be prevented if everyone chose this step first. Too often we are tempted to talk to others to ease our anxiety but this simply compounds our grievance.

Tuesday – Read Matthew 18:21-22. When Jesus told Peter to forgive seventy-seven times he was using hyperbole for effect. In other words, Jesus was commanding Peter and all of us to keep on forgiving. We should not keep track of how many times we forgive. One of the reasons this is important is because we have a tendency to be terrible at math when it comes to forgiveness. We underestimate our own sins and overestimate the sins of others.

Wednesday – Matthew 18:23-35. This convicting parable reminds us that biblical forgiveness always starts with a look in the mirror. It does not start with stewing about the wrong that was done to us; it starts by being thoughtful about the bad things we have done to others. When we start by looking in the mirror we are reminded how much we have been forgiven. This makes it much easier to forgive others.

Thursday – Read Luke 17:3-4. We are called as Christians to forgive but forgiveness does not mean rolling over and being a punching bag for others. Jesus commands us to forgive but he also commands us to confront and rebuke those who have wronged us. We must set proper boundaries.

Friday – Read Romans 12:17-21. This passage reminds us that if we follow Jesus revenge is not an option. In fact, we are to overcome evil with good. But there is a liberating idea in verse 19. We are to hand over our pain and anger to God. He promises to settle our grievance in his own time and in his own way. It is not our job to carry it. We are to forgive and give our grievance to God.



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