

May 3, 2020

Hebrews 10: 15-18

Prayer: Dear Lord, we long for the day when we can fill this sanctuary again with prayer and song, thanksgiving and fellowship. We pray that our worship is pleasing to you during this time. In Jesus' name we make that prayer, Amen.

A God Who Forgets

In my last three months in this pulpit, I plan to preach a few “best of” sermons. That is, I want to return to some favorite stories, favorite songs, favorite themes from my 15 years at Triune.

I'll start that next week with “Best of... Mother's Day.” But for today, here's a story some of you may remember.

I'd been on the job at Triune just a couple of years when I got a phone call one afternoon. The woman said, “This is Ruth Graham from Virginia.”

She said she was starting a new ministry and had found our website. She wanted to visit.

“Sure,” I said, and we set a date. As I hung up, I remember thinking, “Oh, that poor woman. Trying to do ministry with the same name as Billy Graham’s wife.”

A few weeks later, this woman and one of her board members came to Triune. I spent about 90 minutes showing them all around the church and talking about how homeless people were part of our congregation. About how we dealt openly with addiction.

She told me her plan was to build a ministry to churches that would urge them to acknowledge the hurt and brokenness of their members, and to respond in love, not censure.

“What’s the name of your ministry?” I asked her.

She said, “Well, it’s been Ruth Graham Ministries, but I’m thinking of changing it to the Transparent Church.”

I said, “Yeah, that’s probably a good idea. I imagine you get mixed up with Billy Graham’s late wife.”

And she said, “Well, Mother usually went by Ruth Bell Graham.”

Now I am not proud of this. But I actually said, “Isn’t that a coincidence? I believe Billy Graham’s wife was a Bell, too.”

By then, both women were looking at me like, *What is wrong with you?*

Then, and only then, did I realize – this was Billy Graham’s daughter, Ruth.

The upshot was that Ruth Graham had a lot of brokenness in her life – a husband’s affair, multiple divorces, children with drug problems and eating disorders and teen pregnancies. And for a long time, she felt tremendous pressure to hide it because of the Graham name.

But she ended up making transparency a cornerstone of her ministry. She urges churches to embrace that brokenness, acknowledge it, shine a light on it, heal it, rather than sweep it under the rug.

She came to Triune because she understood we were of like minds. We didn't try to pretty things up. We admitted that we faced addiction and stealing and casual adultery and assault among our parishioners. We just felt that there's where the gospel should be lived and preached.

I remembered Ruth's visit a few weeks ago when she mailed me her newest book. It is called "Forgiving My Father, Forgiving Myself." And though she is known for incredible transparency in her previous books, she plowed some new territory here.

She wrote about forgiving her father, Billy Graham, for abandoning her as a child.

As the world's foremost evangelist in the 1950s and '60s and '70s, Billy Graham was away from home for months at a time. Even in his memoirs, he wrote that he realized his time away caused negative repercussions for his children.

Ruth is quick to say that she loved her father, adored her father. She recognizes that he was called by God to step into history in a unique way at a unique time, and she doesn't blame him.

But at the same time, the little girl inside her felt abandoned at his long absences. And that played out in a lifetime of hurt and brokenness.

You know, it doesn't matter a whole lot if our feelings are "justified" or "correct" or even "accurate." They are our feelings, and we need to deal with them.

Dealing with them is an active choice, according to Ruth. It is called forgiveness.

Our Scripture passage this morning is one of the Bible's most beautiful pieces on forgiveness. It comes from the epistle to the **Hebrews 10: 15-18.**

¹⁵And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying,

¹⁶ 'This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord:

I will put my laws in their hearts,
and I will write them on their minds',

¹⁷he also adds,

'I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.'

¹⁸Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

Hebrews is a New Testament epistle, or letter, by an unknown writer. It pictures Jesus as the ultimate high priest, a priest who ushers in a new age.

No longer will the Jewish priests stand “**day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins.**” No, now we have a better way. Jesus Christ has taken away those sins once and for all, and we can appeal directly to him for forgiveness.

And because of that God says, **“I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.”**

The writer of Hebrews is quoting God’s word from the prophet Jeremiah (31: 34). And what a promise!

I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.

This is better than forgiveness. Better than anything I can imagine. To have one’s failings and shortcomings and shame simply forgotten, erased from our Lord’s memory.

Can you imagine such a gift for Ruth Graham? She is 69 years old, and her books are filled with details of a spouse who cheated, of four divorces, of years of struggles with her children, whom she believes she hurt, almost irreparably.

It was only when her fourth marriage was floundering that a friend confronted her about the abandonment issue. It was an “aha”

moment as Ruth realized that feeling lay at the root of so many of her problems as well as the problems she had passed on.

So she gathered her three children and their spouses on an Easter Sunday. And as they sat out on the patio overlooking the Blue Ridge mountains, Ruth asked for their forgiveness. Forgiveness for all the wrongful situations she'd put them in. Forgiveness for all the wrongful decisions she'd made that had repercussions for them.

Then she went around the circle, one by one. "Will you forgive me?" *Will you forgive me? Will you forgive me?*

They did. And that's where her book ends.

Forgiveness is a wonderful thing. But God promises us even more.

I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.

Today is the first Sunday of the month, which is traditionally the day we observe communion. Anyone who has ever worshiped with us on a communion Sunday has commented on the diverse array of people who kneel at our altar rail to take the bread and the juice. A homeless man next to a Furman student next to an attorney next to a carnival worker.

For many years one of our parishioners was a brain-injured homeless woman who went by two different names. At any given time, she would answer to only one.

She would snarl at people who tried to sit next to her. She'd hit the drums as she walked to the bathroom in the middle of a service.

But communion is a great equalizer. One Sunday morning she knelt at the altar rail. "The body of Christ broken for you, Denise," I said, hoping that was the name of the day. "The blood of Christ shed for you."

And she turned to the Furman professor kneeling next to her and beamed, "Pastor knows my name!"

Communion is a space in which a child of God can be called by name.

Two of our men once asked why I invite everyone to the communion table. *Aren't some of us in a state of sin and shouldn't take it*, they asked?

Well, sure, *all of us* are in a state of sin, I answered. Including me. And I have no intention of grading sin to decide who's allowed at the communion table and who's not.

The reason our table is open to everyone is because that is where we meet this God who has promised to "**remember (our) sins and lawless deeds no more.**"

In human terms, sometimes forgiving and forgetting seems impossible, especially, perhaps, forgiving and forgetting our own personal horrors.

In human terms, the inability to forgive ourselves underlies much of the dysfunction, the hopelessness, that we see in lives at the Mercy Center. Some of us have decided that we have made so many mistakes, hurt so many people, told so many lies, that our lives are not worth saving.

Some of us feel that no one can understand what we are going through. The trauma, the hurt that landed someone on the street ... the trauma, the hurt of living on the street may keep us from sharing our memories. Forgetting may be a lifetime goal.

But the good news is: We do not have to live in human terms.

We get to live in divine terms. As the rest of the letter to the Hebrews assures us, Jesus's sacrifice allows us into the Most Holy Place, the inner sanctum of God.

And in that sanctum, he doesn't even remember our sins and our lawless deeds.

We have only to forget them ourselves.

Amen.

If you would like to observe communion this morning, pause the video and get a bit of bread and wine or juice. It can be anything from crusty Italian bread to a Saltine cracker, anything from a fine Bordeaux to cranberry juice. *(pause)*

Communion is the way in which we follow our Lord's instruction to join him in the remembrance of his broken body and spilled blood.

It is one of the ways we practice discipleship even as we await his return. At Triune it is a way that we insist on the equality of all, the welcome of all, the love of Christ Jesus poured out for all.

I will read from Paul's instructions in I Corinthians.

11: 23 For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread,²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' (*Eat the bread.*)

²⁵In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

(Drink.)

Prayer: Dear Lord, Thank you for being a God who seeks communion with your children. A God who forgives us. A God who forgets our sins and lawless deeds.

***Benediction: The LORD bless you and keep you;
²⁵ the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
²⁶ the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.***