

Please echo this prayer.

Oh God who made the heart and ear,
We listen care'fly as you draw near,
To hear your word in many ways
And live your life throughout our days.

Please hear a word of God from I John 3:18-20 and 4:7-8.

18 Little children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth. **19** And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him **20** whenever our hearts condemn us, for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. **8** Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

This is a word from God to the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

I.

Introduction

Yesterday, we had movie day at TMC.

We watched The Straight Story starring Richard Farnsworth and Sissy Spacek and directed by David Lynch.

It's a movie about 'learning to forgive your enemy,' in this case two brothers, Alvin and Lyle Straight, who used to be so close when they were kids they'd lie down beside each other in their yard at night to watch the stars, but who haven't spoken to each other in years.

It's very much a heroes journey.

Lyle has a life threatening stroke.

73-year-old Alvin sets out from Laurens, Iowa to Mt. Zion, Wisconsin, a 240 mile trip.

He does so on a 1966 John Deere riding lawn mower pulling a home made trailer.

He drives a lawn mower because he has struggled with alcoholism in his past and has lost his driver's license.

When Alvin is asked about his broken relationship with his brother, he says, "Anger, vanity and liquor did it. But I want to make peace. I want us to be able to look up at the stars together again."

Something important happens in the middle of the movie.

Alvin is sitting with another old man he meets along his way.

This man is struggling with alcoholism.

They begin sharing stories about fighting in the trenches of World War II.

Alvin has met other people on his way and has been a good listener of their stories and a good counselor to help them go back and forgive their enemies or ask their enemies to forgive them.

At this moment, though, Alvin needs a good listener and a good counselor.

He confesses something he did, a horrible thing, during the war.

He'd been a sniper in his unit fighting in Germany.

One night one of this comrades, a teenaged boy who did reconnaissance for the unit, was coming back to camp through the woods.

He rustles through the bushes.

Lyle accidentally shoots and kills him.

Everyone else in the unit thinks a German sniper killed the boy.

Only Alvin knows it was him.

Alvin begins "learning how to forgive yourself," something that he had to do before he could learn how to forgive his brother.

So this is what I'd like to preach about today.

Learning how to forgive our enemies when the enemy is ourself.

When John and the other apostles encountered Jesus, they discovered the God who loves us so deeply that God has chosen to exist with us despite our failures. This revelation of God is so surprising and unexpected that John's final words call us to "keep away from idols," that is, to resist any temptation to remake God in our own image (1 John 5:21). To know Jesus is to know the God of creative life-giving and self-giving love.

(The Bible Project)

God's will is that we...love in actions and not just in words. Such is the truth of Jesus' instructions. We learn to forgive ourselves when we speak as we act and act as we speak. When we learn how to forgive ourselves, we will know "that we are from the truth" and we will abide in God.

(Gustavo Gutiérrez, Sharing the Word through the Liturgical Year)

I was ordained by a small community in Louisville, Kentucky.

That community was (and still is) called Jeff Street Baptist Community at Liberty.

We lived and worked beside the second largest housing project in Louisville at that time, the Clarksdale Housing Projects.

Our proximity, our closeness, to inner-city poverty helped my heart grow during those years.

There were many who were oppressed and who needed to receive the good news, the gospel, that God loved them.

There were many who were brokenhearted and who needed their wounds to be cared for, bandaged, and gently healed.

There were many who were captives (to all kinds of addiction) and who needed liberty.

There were many who were prisoners (in jail or prison for many different reasons) and who needed release.

There were many who needed to see and hear and experience the proclamation of the year of the Lord's favor, that God was (and is) on the side of the poor and oppressed of the world, on the side of the smallest and most forgotten among us.

There were many who were mourning and who needed comfort.

Jeff Street was there for them.

I was there for them.

Ready to share God's love and forgiveness with every single person that I met every single day.

At least I thought "every single person."

For as I sat before my ordination council at that time in that place, a social worker asked me a question that I hadn't thought about.

"Do you think," he asked, "that you can show the same grace to yourself that you show to others?"

"I hope you can," he said.

Wow.

What a question.

Sometimes, the hardest person with whom to share God's love is yourself.

Sometimes, the hardest person to learn how to forgive is yourself.

"It's what's inside that counts most," pointed out Seven.

Zero looked at herself.

"But...what if I don't have anything inside?"

"Every number has value," said Seven.

"Be open. You'll find a way."

Suddenly Zero saw herself in a new light.

"I'm not empty inside. I'm open!"

(Kathryn Otoshi, Zero)

In this beautiful story, Zero looks at her center and just sees an empty hole. She thinks she's worth nothing. She tries to force, flatten, and twist herself into being someone else just so she can feel like she counts.

But Seven changes everything by looking past her outward shape and saying: 'It's what's inside that counts most.' Seven helps Zero realize she isn't empty—she is open.

We're in this sermon series called 'Learning to Love Our Enemies.' We usually think of enemies as people out there who hurt us, oppose us, or disagree with us. But if we're completely honest, many of us treat ourselves the way Zero treated herself. We look at our own lives and only see a hole. We look at our flaws and declare ourselves a 'zero.' We become our own worst enemy—hostile, critical, and unforgiving to our own selves.

But when Jesus reminds us that part of the great commandment is to love our neighbors as ourselves, he implies a profound truth: we cannot truly love others if we are actively at war with who we are. So, we're going to look at what it means to stop treating ourselves like the enemy, to listen to the voice that reminds us of our inherent value, and to discover that what God put inside us counts most.

II.

Michael DeBruhl's grandparents lived in Segundo Barrio, a humble neighborhood in El Paso, Texas on the Mexican border.

"When I was eight years old, I used to play here," he says of the neighborhood.

When Michael grew older, he became a teacher.

His life changed when his dad, who had worked for 40 years as a customs officer at ports of entry between the United States and Mexico, took him to a job fair.

There, he came across a Customs and Border Protection stand and decided to become a CBP agent.

He attained good working conditions and a generous pension.

He was in charge of controlling the border and arresting people who tried to enter the country illegally.

He looked exactly how you would think a CBP agent would look.

He wore a brown uniform, shiny badge, cowboy boots, a cowboy hat, and reflective sunglasses as he worked the border each day.

When he graduated from the CBP academy, his dad told him, "Border patrol is not like customs; you deal with people, with human beings. Always treat people with respect, give them the dignity they deserve. Never eat in front of anyone unless you are going to share your lunch with them; treat people how you would like to be treated yourself."

He worked as a CBP agent for 26 years.

At the time of his retirement, he realized that people he'd worked for had lied to him about migrants.

Those people had demonized migrants.

"I heard things like every migrant is a criminal," said DeBruhl. "I've interviewed hundreds of migrants, maybe a thousand, and I know that's not true."

He came to realize that the life he'd been living and the work he'd been doing was antithetical to what his dad had told him all those years ago.

What if Michael had become trapped in what he had become?

What if he could not forgive himself?

What if he could no longer love himself?

He came heart to heart with God and learned that God wanted him to turn and live.

He turned toward life.

That means he forgave himself as God had forgiven him.

That means he loved himself as God loves him.

Because he turned toward life, he decided to volunteer at the Casa del Sagrado Corazón (House of the Sacred Heart) in El Paso, which serves migrants who have just crossed the border, helping them with basic needs before they go on their way.

Then he took over as director of the migrant shelter.

"The main thing is to make [migrants] feel safe," he says, "To ensure they have three meals a day, clothing, that they are in contact with their sponsors, and that they can find out how they are going to move north."

Because he turned toward life, he was able to give life.

That is a beautiful thing.

(Marta Campabadal, "From detaining migrants to helping them: The change of life of an El Paso border patrol agent," El País, June 25, 2024)

III.

In my favorite T.V. show, Ted Lasso, Ted spends all of his time believing in everybody.

Everybody, that is, except himself.

When Ted arrives in England to coach AFC Richmond, he carries a ridiculous amount of optimism with him. He encourages people. He remembers their names. He forgives them. He notices the person standing alone in the room. He sees possibilities in people they cannot yet see in themselves.

Ted is extraordinarily good at giving grace away.

But as the series unfolds, we discover something.

Ted is hurting.

Behind the mustache and jokes and relentless optimism is a man carrying grief, anxiety, loneliness, and wounds from his past.

He begins experiencing panic attacks.

And then Dr. Sharon Fieldstone enters his life.

She is a psychologist hired by the club, and Ted doesn't particularly want her help. In some ways, therapy threatens the way Ted has learned to survive. Ted takes care of other people. Ted makes other people laugh. Ted asks other people how they are doing.

Dr. Sharon begins asking Ted how Ted is doing.

And that is much harder.

Slowly, Ted begins telling the truth about himself.

He talks about his pain.

He talks about his father.

He talks about the things he has spent years hiding behind kindness and humor.

And something remarkable happens.

Ted doesn't become less kind.

He becomes more whole.

That may be one of the great lessons of Ted Lasso: loving ourselves doesn't mean standing in front of a mirror telling ourselves how wonderful we are.

Sometimes loving ourselves means having enough compassion for ourselves to tell the truth.

It means allowing our own wounds to receive some of the tenderness we so freely give to everybody else's wounds.

It means believing that the grace we keep handing out to other people belongs to us, too.

Maybe Jesus' words—"Love your neighbor as yourself"—contain an invitation we sometimes miss.

We spend a lot of time talking about loving the neighbor.

But there is another person in that sentence.

You.

Ted Lasso had spent years believing in everyone around him.

Eventually, he had to learn to sit quietly with another human being and begin believing that Ted was worth caring for, too.

And maybe that is where loving ourselves begins: when we finally offer ourselves the same grace we have been offering everybody else.

IV.

Conclusion

So, friends, hear the good news.

**God is not interested in keeping us trapped in what we have done.
God wants us to turn toward life and live.**

Why do we confront one another?

So that life might be restored. God wants us to turn toward life and live.

Why does Joseph refuse revenge?

So that life can continue. God wants us to turn toward life and live.

Why does God spare Nineveh?

Because God desires life rather than destruction. God wants us to turn toward life and live.

Why do we bind and loose?

For the sake of life. So that we turn toward life. God wants us to turn toward life and live.

God's deepest purpose is not to catch us, condemn us, or keep us chained to yesterday. God's desire is that we turn toward life and live.

May it be so.

Amen.

Benediction

No matter who you are or what you've done, who you love or what you've lost, where you've gone or where you've stayed, there will always be a seat for you at Triune Mercy because you are a beloved child of God.