

John 8
March 13, 2016
Cross of Redemption

I had not really planned on taking a trip this time of year, and yet I found myself packing rather hurriedly. This trip was going to be unpleasant and I knew in advance that no real good would come of it. I'm talking about my annual "Guilt Trip."

I got tickets to fly there on Wish I Had airlines. It was an extremely short flight. I got my baggage, which I could not check. I chose to carry it myself all the way. It was weighted down with a thousand memories of what might have been. No one greeted me as I entered the terminal to the Regret City International Airport. I say international because people from all over the world come to this dismal town.

As I checked into the Last Resort Hotel, I noticed that they would be hosting the year's most important event, the Annual Pity Party. I wasn't going to miss that great social occasion. Many of the town's leading citizens would be there.

First, there would be the Done family, you know, Should Have, Would Have and Could Have. Then came the I Had family. You probably know ol' Wish and his clan. Of course, the Opportunities would be present, Missed and Lost. The biggest family would be the Yesterdays. There are far too many of them to count, but each one would have a very sad story to share.

Then Shattered Dreams would surely make an appearance. And It's Their Fault would regale us with stories (excuses) about how things had failed in his life, and each story would be loudly applauded by Don't Blame Me and I Couldn't Help It.

Well, to make a long story short, I started to truly realize that I did not have to be there. I didn't have to be depressed. So, if you're planning a trip to the City of Regret, please cancel all your reservations now. Instead, take a trip to a place called Starting Again. I liked it so much that I have now taken up permanent residence there. My neighbors, the I Forgive Myselfs and the New Starts are so very helpful. By the way, you don't have to carry around heavy baggage, because the load is lifted from your shoulders upon arrival. God bless you in finding this great town.

This humorous little story has a serious point. We are all on journey through life. Each of us headed down different paths. Each of us carrying all sorts of baggage – of hurts, regrets, mistakes, and pain caused to us or to others by what we have said and done or left unsaid and undone in our relationships. And the question is - what do we do with it? Where can we take it? Where is our relief? How do we find the place of starting again? Well, as people of faith, we find that place at the foot of the cross of redemption and forgiveness. In this season of Lent, we have looked at the cross – the cross of grace – God's tremendous gift of new life that transforms us from the inside out. We looked at the cross of comfort where Jesus takes our burdens and hurts offering us healing. We looked at the cross of compassion where Jesus sees us as precious treasures and calls us to do the same with how we see the weak and vulnerable in our midst. And so today we look at the cross from this fourth angle – this fourth perspective – that of redemption and forgiveness – Of Jesus saying to us – “Come, drop your bags that are weighing down your souls and come start again with me”. For redemption is Jesus claiming us – all of us the good, the bad, the ugly – forgiving us, freeing us, and giving us a new start – a new life.

And so this is what we see in our Gospel lesson as we hear of this woman who was caught in an act of adultery. This woman who needs to start again. And yet that isn't what the Pharisees and scribes, the religious leaders of Jesus' day wanted - they wanted to trap Jesus by creating a situation where He would have to choose between His message of forgiveness and obeying the laws handed down from Moses. These critics used her for their own personal agenda. But Jesus saw through this trap.

He knew that self-righteous judging crowd were no better than she, and Jesus knew it and he said it. For being perfect is not a requirement for forgiveness and new life. For Jesus tells that crowd and that woman, we are called to be faithful, not perfect. For the truth of this passage is this: God loves us for who we are, who we can become and by God's grace who we are becoming.

The cross of redemption is our ticket to starting again through the way of forgiveness. Again and again in scripture we hear of Jesus offering forgiveness – he taught that we should forgive “not seven times But seventy times seven times” in others word because of his use of the number seven which was considered a perfect number to Hebrews of his day we are to forgive completely as long as a person lives and as long as we live. Jesus taught forgiveness in prayer as he taught us through the Lords prayers to “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” and he practiced it when he forgave those he came across in his travels including the woman we heard today about to be stoned by the crowd – in fact Jesus rarely left people without offering forgiveness. And we declare every time we take communion when we state his words – “this is my blood of the new covenant poured out for you and for

many for the forgiveness of sins” and of course on the cross one of Jesus’ last words were “Forgive them”.

On and on Jesus offers us forgiveness, redemption, new life. It is so central to who he is and what the cross is all about. But this compassion and forgiveness is not just a one-time free pass. It is not a get out of jail card, to continue as before playing the sin game. When Jesus declared to the woman - “Neither do I condemn you.” In other words – you are forgiven. He followed with “Go and sin no more”. The compassion of Jesus gave her and gives us all a new life. We are as children of God through the cross of redemption – forgiven and freed. This is what Paul proclaims when he wrote – “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away, see everything has become new”

Forgiveness is the key to a new life – Scripture doesn’t say what happened with the woman who was almost stoned after she left Jesus, but I would like to believe that she followed Jesus, listening and learning, growing and changing. Maybe she stood at a distance as he was crucified and rejoiced at the news of his resurrection. Perhaps she went on to spread his message. I don’t know what happened to her, but I know that she was changed and her relationships with others were changed because our encounters and relationship with Christ never leaves us the same. Our relationship with Christ gives our earthly relationships, our marriages, our friendships the grounding and foundation in love and grace that is needed for them to be healthy and strong. For if we don’t it only leads to a hardening of our hearts.

So let me tell you about two men – the first was a famous welter-weight boxer by the name of James Tony. He was known for his aggressiveness in the ring. He packed a powerful

punch. He fought like a man that was possessed. And he was very, very good. He was the welter-weight champion of the world for many, many years. And one day after one of his fights, a reporter asked him, James, what makes you so good? Why do you fight with such incredible passion? And with such tremendous aggression in the ring? And of course, that reporter thought he'd get a standard answer that we've all heard you know a thousand times. Like, I just love to box. This is my life. This is what I love to do. But that's not what James said. He said, Sir, do you really want to know why I fight with such anger and with such aggression? He said, it's because my dad abandoned me when I was a child. And he left all of my brothers and sisters fatherless and alone for my mother to raise by herself. And every time I step into that ring, I'll picture my dad's face on my opponent's face. I have such anger and I have such hatred toward him I just explode. And I know that if I can rip his face off, every single time I'll win.

See, he was driven by this unresolved anger that was buried deep down on the inside of him. He had success on the outside but poison on the inside. So, when his doctor told him he had to stop fighting because it was threatening his life he couldn't do it. He couldn't let go of his anger and so year after year he kept fighting until one particular fight he was knocked out, put into a coma and died.

James just couldn't forgive and it was a poison that year after year ate away at his heart and soul crippling his life. But when we forgive our souls are set free. So, let me tell you about a policeman in New York City, Steven McDonald, who tried to stop a robbery that was taking place in Central Park. He was shot by a fifteen-year-old teenager, Shavad Jones. From that day, thirteen years ago, Steven has not moved anything below his neck. He breathes through a

breathing tube and spends much of his day in a wheelchair. He has taken on a new vocation, traveling to grade schools and high schools speaking about the need for forgiveness, and the need to practice non-violence in response to conflict and problems. He tells his listeners that he has forgiven Shavad Jones, that in fact he forgives him everyday, for everyday he must deal with the pain of his massive afflictions. He encourages children to sign a pledge of non-violence, a commitment on their part to not use aggression or hurt in their dealings with each other.

Shavad Jones was released from prison and, only several days after his release, was killed. Steven McDonald's third grade son went to his teacher after he heard his father's assailant had been killed and asked the teacher if they could pray for the man who shot and crippled his dad.

Not only was Steven set free but he was able to teach this to his son. Because forgiveness is a way of life.

Forgiveness is not saying the offense never happened. It did.

Forgiveness is not saying that everything's okay. It isn't.

Forgiveness is not saying we no longer feel the pain of the offense. We do.

Forgiveness is saying "I still feel the pain, but I am willing to let go of it's stranglehold on my heart."

Forgiveness is an attitude of faith where we seek freedom by surrendering everything to God, emptying our hearts, and in admitting we can't do it alone, give our pain to him.

So what does forgiveness look like – Forgiveness looks like a woman caught in the act of adultery who gets a second chance. Who meets a savior who stands beside her, stands up for her even if it means he is killed with her, and offers her a new life through him.

Forgiveness looks like the parents standing by their son or daughter who is an alcoholic. Even though she has stolen from them, lied to them and been arrested numerous times, nothing can change the parent's love for this child.

Forgiveness looks like Jesus Christ beaten, bloody, suffering on a cross, choosing to die so that you and I might have eternal life.

Forgiveness looks like a person weighed down to the breaking point with a backpack of stones of their hurt and anger and hatred that they carry around each day, and one day they take the backpack off and cast the stones into the river of God's mercy, love, and hope, refusing to be burdened with them, and in so doing giving the burden to God to transform through his love and mercy.

Forgiveness is refusing to take the poison of hate and regret thinking it will hurt the other person.

So let us come today to the cross and with open hearts set down and give up our burdens, our pains, our mistakes, everything and anything that is eating away at us and accept the forgiveness that is being freely offered so that we can turn the page to leave here as new creations of Christ. Let us come in prayer to ask for the strength to forgive ourselves and others.

Let us come and say - "O God, I'm tired of this burden and I'm ready to give it to you. Lord, make me new. Come and rule my heart. Give me strength to walk in the path of

forgiveness and peace. Help me to forgive. Help me to let go. Help me to accept your love and mercy that I might be changed and through me the world might be changed and transformed.”

Amen.