

Pastor Brad H. Boyer
"To Whom Shall We Go?"
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Mt Olive Lutheran Church
Irmo, SC

Grace and peace be unto you through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

I'd like to point your attention back to our opening psalm this morning: "Bless the Lord, O my soul...who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases." (Ps 103:1, 3)

What's the "f-word" there—the good kind? You got it—*forgiveness*. Forgiveness is our theme today, it weaves through, it saturates, all our Scripture readings today.

Let's just dwell a moment on that. What is the blessed Lord forgiving here? *Iniquity*. What is iniquity? Sin, yes, but more than the fact of sin, the guilt, the slimy shame that comes from sin.

Think about it. All those scandalous headlines? All the poison that seems to wrap itself around families from generation to generation? The goo you can never forget, never wash off, never just walk away from? FORGIVEN. GONE. No wonder the follow-up to the Lord forgiving iniquity is "[he] who heals all your diseases"! (Ps 103:3b)

Our next reading, Joseph in Genesis 45, wonderfully illustrates this forgiveness in action. Joseph has been sold by his brothers, abandoned for dead, forgotten long ago. But God did not forget; he raised Joseph from the shame of slavery to be second only to Pharaoh. And now here his starving brothers come groveling before him.

Now as we read our text, was Joseph angry? Did he lord it over them? "I have you now, right where I want you! Ha, ha, ha, ha!" No. He says, "Do not be distressed...for God sent me [here]." (Gen 45:5)

You see, that's forgiveness. GOD sent me here. YOU thought you did something, but GOD had another idea in mind. One way you could define forgiveness is seeing God's plan even in the worst circumstances.

Jesus builds on the idea of forgiveness in Luke 6: "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful." (Lk 6:27, 36)

There is an obvious problem here. I am here today as just a guest preacher; my regular job is across town at Fort Jackson. And I've got a secret to tell you. In a few moments we will recite the Nicene Creed, but every year, 40,000 raw recruits are taught a different creed, the Soldiers Creed. And part of the Soldiers Creed states, "I will close with and destroy the enemies of the United States of America in close combat."

Did you hear that? "Close with and destroy"! Doesn't sound like forgiveness to me! Whatever happened to "love your enemies"? How can you be a Soldier—how can you be a chaplain for Soldiers—who are nothing but killers?

By way of answer, let's take a look at the cross. Most of us look at the cross as good news, a symbol of hope, welcoming. But let's get real. The cross was—is—an instrument of death. Of torture. Of defeat. Of shame. The Romans invented a cross to terrorize people into submission.

The modern equivalent of the cross is perhaps the electric chair. Could you imagine singing hymns retitled to something like, “The Old Rugged Sparky”? “Lift High the Electric”?

You see, the cross is indeed a symbol of hope, but we must first realize it is the symbol of despair. The cross is indeed a symbol of life, but it is also a symbol of death. Jesus’ death on the cross is the surest sign that God loves us—but also the surest sign that our sin was so bad that it took the terror of the cross to pay for them.

That’s where our Epistle lesson comes in. “Adam lived in such a way that the result for us is death. But Jesus died in such a way that the result for us is life.” (1 Corinthians 15:21-22, paraphrased)

So I say again, the cross is simultaneously the best good news, and the worst bad news. It is the ultimate symbol of God’s love and the ultimate sign of God’s wrath against our sin. Sin so bad it required death, the death of Jesus.

So let’s get back to our moral dilemma. How can Soldiers, killers, possible call themselves Christian? Let us not forget that the cross means that the whole world is in the grip of evil. What is evil? Evil is the bad that you cannot ever seem to stop, to stop doing yourself or to get other people to stop.

Think of evil as a rabid dog. There you are, minding your own business in the back yard, grilling up some barbecue for dinner. And then you hear a snarl and a rustle and before you know it, this rabid dog has a death grip on your leg. You scream, you yell, you whap it with your barbecue tongs, and it just grips harder and harder. You realize there is only one thing you can do to stop it: kill it.

Sin is like rabies. It cannot be reasoned with. Diplomacy fails. Logic goes out the window. It can only be killed.

So you see, the Soldier’s job is to act as God’s agent in killing the rabid dogs, so to speak, who are killing the innocent. Soldiers do that job at best roughly and imperfectly, but it’s still God’s work.

But what about that bad man himself? How can we say, “I love you, I kill you”?

Imagine if you will another situation. Your kids are fighting. I don’t mean bickering. I mean really threatening. So you wade in there to break things up before things get really out of hand.

So let’s say one of your kids says, “You don’t love me; you don’t let me do what I want.”

Ridiculous. Your love of that child is precisely what led you to charge in and prevent further evil.

You get it? Soldiers charge in to prevent further evil. The sad thing about evil is that evil can so grip a man that the only way to prevent him from further evil is to kill him. He will not stop until he’s dead. So the best way to love him when he is so given to evil is to kill him. To just stand by and let him accumulate even more guilt? To let even more innocents suffer? That is not love.

Now, not all of us are Soldiers. But all of us are in some sort of a family or the other. All of us are neighbors of somebody. All of us are citizens. All of us are in a position to speak and point out evil for what it is. God has put you there, like he put Joseph there, to bring life and light into the situation.

God grant us the heart to call out evil for what it is!

God grant us the heart to point to the cross as God's quenching of all evil!

God grant us courage. God grant us love. HIS love.

Amen.