

Coram Deo
Soli Deo Gloria, Soli Deo Gracia, Soli Scriptura
Agnus Dei, Qui Tollis Peccata Mundi
Deo Volente
Sermon Preach at Stouffville United Church
by the Rev. Dr. John S. Niles

“You are Forgiven”

Series 6

*Sermon Series: Who Do You Think You Are?
Finding Your True Identity in Christ.*

Ephesians 2:1-21

February 20, 2022

2 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh^[a] and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

At a convention with their wives, two businessmen who had been roommates in college crossed paths. They sat in the lobby all night talking. They knew they would be in trouble with their wives. The next day they happened to see each other. "What did your wife think?"

"I walked in the door and my wife got historical."

"Don't you mean hysterical?"

"No, historical. She told me everything I ever did wrong."...

A minister was counseling a couple getting ready to marry. He said, "Jim, place your hand on top of Sally's hand." Jim did so. Then the minister said, "Now, Jim, I want you to know, that after you are married this will be the last time you will ever have the upper hand."

After I was married, my father came to me and said, "Son, "I have learned one thing after all these years, and that is that in an argument the woman always has the last word." I said, "Why?" "Because anything a man says after that is just the start of another argument."

Life isn't always simple. Things happen. And how response is so very important. We live in a world where it's so easy to become callused, indifferent and unforgiving. We are bombarded daily with news of tragedies, violent acts, and suffering people. Living sanely in such a world as

this, often necessitates developing a thick skin. Unfortunately, a thick skin and a hard heart are often confused with one another. Instead of developing a thick skin, many develop a hard heart. As a result you can find hard, unforgiving people everywhere in our society. Unfortunately, their hardness has made them cynical and merciless.

We've learned over the last month or so, that our identity is found in Christ, and as such we come to understand that you are chosen, adopted, precious in God's sight, a new creation, and that you are worthy and you are love. And because of this you are forgiven. "...*But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.*

I

There is a **brutality** to a life without forgiveness and mercy. Isn't there?

For the most part, the days in which Jesus lived and taught were not characterized by mercy. A popular Roman philosopher called mercy "the disease of the soul". It was the supreme sign of weakness.

Mercy was a sign that you did not have what it takes to be a real man and especially a real Roman. The Roman glorified manly courage, strict justice, and firm discipline, and above all, absolute power. They looked down on mercy, because mercy to them was weakness and weakness was despised above all other human limitations.

During much of Roman history, a father had the right of *patria opitestas*, of deciding whether or not his newborn child would live or die. As the infant was held up for him to see, the father would turn his thumb up if he wanted the child to live or down if he wanted it to die. If his thumb turned down the child was immediately drowned. Husbands could even have their wives put to death on the least provocation. This society despised mercy. And a society that despises mercy is a society that glorifies brutality.

Though today, we catch a glimpse of mercy every once in a while, we still live in a society where we glory in brutality. We have a society that is fascinated by it. We watch with delight gory movies getting our fix. And then we watch with righteous disgust the news of countries in turmoil.

T.S. Eliot referred to this, when he coined the phrase; "Thunder without rain." Every one of us, has been outside when we heard thunder in the distance, yet no rain had come. Thunder can be a frightening thing. It can seem menacing to a little child in the dark, and even an adult in the light. The crack of thunder can send shivers up and down your spine.

Eliot, was suggesting that the phrase, "thunder without rain", signifies the threat from the heavens without any blessing to soften its severity. It is judgement without mercy. It is legalism without liberty.

I once found one of my boys when he was very young, huddled in a corner one night after he went to bed with his legs and knees up to his chin crying. Each time, it thundered the tears would stream down his cheeks. His cheeks were burned by the salt from the tears. And through the tears the words came. "Daddy, why doesn't it rain? I like the rain--because if the thunder and lightning start a fire the rain will put it out."

Too much of life is thunder without rain--brutality without mercy. We need to remember to tread softly.

W.B. Yeats wrote it this way

Had I the heaven's embroidered cloths
Inwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

And so, Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

II

You are forgiven! Now, notice not only the brutality to a life without forgiveness and mercy, notice also, the **equality** of forgiveness and mercy. Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." *But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.*

The law and justice say: "If you do this, this is the punishment you will receive." Physics says: "For every action there is an opposite and equal reaction." Justice also says, "If you do this, this is what you do to put things right."

The chickens do come home to roost, we do reap what we sow, and if we live by the sword we will die by it.

Gamaliel, the famous rabbi, is quoted in the Talmud as saying, "Whenever thou hast mercy, God will have mercy on thee."

What he said is true. Jesus said, "For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions." (Matthew 6:14-15 NASB)

James 2:13 reads, "For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment."

When we show no mercy or forgiveness, we are the losers in terms of God's mercy and forgiveness. If we do not show mercy, no mercy will be shown to us.

We pray "Forgive us our trespasses as we...forgive those who trespass against us. If we want to be experience forgiveness, we need to be willing to forgive. That is the equality of mercy. If we expect to receive it, we must give it.

God has already forgiven you. The fact that you can't receive it – or don't experience it is likely because more to do with your unwillingness to give it. The lack of giving forgiveness, is the impenetrable wall that is in the way of receiving it.

Not being able to forgive or receive forgiveness makes one brittle and the ability to forgive others and yourselves and receive forgiveness gives us the ability to be resilient and comeback from experiencing the brutality of life.

It was about 10 years ago, that a soldier was brought to me by his Chain of command after he melted down while training other medics. They were concerned for his well-being and rightly so. Over the next hour he told of how he had taken every course and training he could to become the best medic because of how he had failed and couldn't forgive himself for what happened at a humanitarian mission he was on where people died and he couldn't help them. He

had screamed at his class that he was instructing, “don’t you know people will die if you don’t learn this.” Even though, he had helped many people stay alive, the first 6 people he encountered died in his arms. He said, “I did nothing, I just held them until they died.” I said, “I know you can’t forgive yourself right now, but let me ask you a couple questions. You do know that some of the best doctors in the world still have patients die on them. Don’t you?” He said, “Yes, but they did something. I did nothing.” “Well, that is not true, I said. You said you held them while they died.” “yes, nothing.” I continued. “Well, after the doctors have nothing more they can do, I have found myself to be in your situation, sitting with a dying person and holding them until they did. I have done this a hundred times over the many years. And I can tell you that what you did was not nothing. It was the most important thing you could have done. You stayed and they didn’t have to die alone.” Over the next hour as he wept out his anger and self-hatred and recrimination, I told them “Whether you want to hear it or not, You are forgiven. God forgives you and even if you don’t believe in God; as his servant and agent on earth I forgive you. It was then that he was willing to receive help, I got him to an addictions counselling as he had begun to self-medicate, and mental health has he had thoughts of suicide. And walked with him until he started to put the pieces of his life together again.

Life can be brutal without mercy and forgiveness.

III

You are forgiven. So notice not only the brutality to a life without mercy, and the equality of mercy. Notice finally, the **quality** of mercy. “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.” *But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.*

The person who is merciful is described as being "kind," or "forgiving," or "people who take pity on others," and "who show mercy to others", and one who is giving.

The word “mercy” is from a Greek word that means charitable and compassionate. Paul was saying that the people of the kingdom of God were to be givers, not takers, forgivers of trespasses, not condemners.

I once heard of a preacher in the old South building up steam in his sermon, moving to a great crescendo. He said, "This church, like the crippled man, has got to get up and walk." The congregation responded, "That's right, reverend, let it walk." And he added, "This church, like Elijah on Mount Carmel, has got to run." "Run, let it run, preacher. Let it run." "This church has go to mount up on wings like wings of eagles and fly." "Let it fly, preacher. Let it fly." Then the preacher added, "Now if this church is gonna fly, it 's gonna take money." They all spoke up in unison, "Let it walk, preacher. Let it walk. Let it walk."

To be merciful not only to be charitable but it is to be compassionate.

A few years ago, I was watching David Letterman, and he was broadcasting his show from Las Vegas. He was doing his opening monologue and he told this joke. He said that he was standing in front of one of the casinos, and a man came up to him looking desperate. "Please!" the man begged frantically. "Could you possibly spare \$500. My wife is very sick, and I really need the money to take her to the doctor and to buy her the medicine she needs." Dave looked at the guy suspiciously, and he asked the man, "Wait a minute! If I give you \$500, how do I know you won't just go into one of the casinos here and gamble it all away?" The man quickly responded, "Oh no, I wouldn't do that! I've got gambling money!"

There is a difference between mercy and stupidity.

Shakespeare said it when he said,
The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

----- Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, act 4, scene

You are forgiven. So for God's sake forgive yourself and others! And then live in that freedom. You think about that. Amen.