

## **Forgiven Again**

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There are times when the writers of lectionary with the good intentions of keeping the readings a manageable length present us with a reading that needs some explanation. Our passage from Acts today is just such a passage. Without what happened before the sermon we have just heard from Peter, the sermon loses some of its power.

This passage follows the account of the healing of the lame man at the gate. Peter is entering the temple and sees a lame man begging in his accustomed spot. He tells him I have no silver or gold (remember it is all in a common pot) but he can offer him a healing. He reaches down and takes the man by his hand and the man jumps to his feet and loudly praises God that he is healed. At least he got that right. Then Peter seizes this teachable moment to tell the astonished crowd about their God and his power. Like the disciples who needed several appearances of the risen Christ to get it, the Jews at the temple are now hearing their second sermon from Peter calling on them to repent.

The setting or the *Sitz em labin* is critical. The setting is of an articulate Jew speaking to Jews at the temple just after the feast of Pentecost (which is a Jewish festival). He knows that he is speaking to some of the same crowd that just a few weeks earlier had been in the courtyard of Pilate yelling for Jesus to be crucified. This is Peter's second major sermon opportunity and he seizes the moment. This message is strictly for the Jewish audience. The time of the message going out to the Gentiles has not come. That is Paul's ministry. Peter's ministry is to his fellow Jews. Peter calls them Israelites to remind them of their identity as a people chosen by God.

There is an image of God, an understanding of how God works in the world that Luke is teaching through Peter. This is the theology that says God knew exactly what was going to happen and in fact this was all according to God's plan. Now, I am the first to admit that this gives me some problems. The idea that God sent Jesus with the plan that he would be killed makes many of us uncomfortable, why is that? Many who criticize Christianity use this concept as a point of contention. I have heard critics of Christianity say that God is child abuser.

How can a father do this to their son is a question I have heard asked many times. How can you worship a God who would do this. The problem with this way of thinking is two fold. First there is the anthropomorphizing of God. This is projecting our human feelings and understandings onto God and that is always dangerous. That is one of the problems with books like the Shack. They make God appear so human that we can forget that God is God if we do not read carefully. Remember in

the Shack the plot is that God appears to McKenzie in the form he needed at that time. This was a very human form, one that was unexpected, but needed. A form that was loving, nurturing rather than the image McKenzie had in his head.

This is not about Abraham and Isaac. There we have two people, two distinct beings. Now there I can say, what was Abraham doing, what was he thinking? This is not the case in the relationship between God and Christ. God and Christ are not Father and Son in our sense, but this is an attempt to explain the relationship in the only way we humans can understand.

The second problem we must examine is our understanding of the Trinity. It is easy to look at God and Christ as separate beings and that is in truth a heresy. The easiest and most common heresy is modalism. In fact Dr. Joe Kelly at John Carroll University stated that the problem with modalism is that it works for our brains. You may have heard the language, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer that was in vogue fairly recently. Nice idea, but that leads us into thinking again in human terms. Three people doing three jobs is not good Trinitarian theology. Here the Shack does a very good job in the chapter entitled a piece of p. There is a single mindedness, a communion of one being with three expressions that is central. Dr. Amy Geary at VTS uses an apple to express this idea. Apples have skin, flesh and a core, but it is very difficult to tell where one begins and the other ends. Not only that but all three are all apple. The problem is that we are trying to understand what is totally and completely beyond our understanding.

If the Father and the Son are one, than God has taken this pain, this abuse unto God's self. Again in the Shack, McKenzie looks at God's wrists and sees the scars on the wrists. Like Thomas, he touches the scars on God's wrists. Please note he is speaking to God in this scene. In other words we are the abusers and God is the one who suffers the abuse.

The important point is that Peter is once again offering the opportunity to repent and be forgiven. God's capacity for this is far beyond human understanding. There is a blessing in Rite 1 that begins: The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God. That is the challenge, but also the joy of our relationship with God. How can we worship God if we can totally and completely understand God. The adult class is talking about heaven and the question is asked what is heaven like. I pray that is beyond any concept that I can think of. So too with God.

Listen to the words of our Eucharistic prayer today:  
But we rebelled against you, and wandered far away; and yet, as a mother cares for her children, you would not forget us. Time and again you called us to live in the fullness of your love.

This image of God is radically different from what many consider the image of God in the Hebrew Scriptures, yet this language is found in the Hebrew scriptures especially the psalms.

The message, the appeal of this kind of capacity for forgiveness is at the heart of the image of God that I preach. This is the loving God who constantly calls to us. This is the loving God however who is willing to let us choose to accept and respond to that call. This is the loving God who like a good parent is willing to let the child stray and learn their lessons the hard way. There is a great verse in one of the psalms that says, but we turned away and you left us to our own devices. Not that God abandons us, or punishes us, but in turning from God we are left to our own devices and that surely gets us in trouble. God however is patient and waits like the mother for her child to crash and then come running back into her lap.

BTW Peter must have been pretty persuasive in this argument since 5000 accept his call to baptism after his sermon. Now that's my idea of a good day!

During this Easter we are going to explore what it means to live as Easter people. The message today is that as Easter people we are forgiven, again and again. Now this is not permission to go out and purposely sin and then expect forgiveness. This is about a God who knows that even our best will often fall short. This is why Peter's call to Israel that is filled with images of the Hebrew prophets, is to repent and return to the Lord. We are saved, not by our efforts, but by Jesus and his life, ministry, death, and resurrection. We live into our full humanity by following the example of Jesus in his full humanity so that we might glimpse the divine. This is what it means to live as Easter people, to live life wrapped in the loving arms of God, even when we do not know it.