

Freed from guilt

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts on the Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 13, 2010.

Now the Lord has put away your sin.

2 Samuel 12:13

The story of David and Bathsheba is a story about unbridled ambition and hedonism. David is an attractive and appealing man to whom many are drawn by the sheer power of his personality and presence. In ancient times, women were looked upon more as property than as people and a man of David's power and stature might take several wives during the course of his lifetime. He so desires Bathsheba for himself that he sends her husband Uriah into the front lines of battle where he is killed. This cruel move allows him to take the widowed Bathsheba for himself, resulting in bringing the wrath of God down upon him. The prophet Nathan convinces David of the seriousness of his sin by telling him a story of a rich man with many flocks who uses a poor man's only lamb to feed one of his own guests. David is enraged at the heartlessness of the rich man in the story and Nathan explains that he is that man. Though he is fully repentant and is assured by Nathan of God's forgiveness, David's life takes a bad turn when his son by Bathsheba falls ill and eventually dies and his kingdom is rent by strife and civil war.

Another example of lack of compassion and mercy is found in Saint Luke's gospel in the story of Jesus visiting in the home of Simon the Pharisee. Simon is a very prosperous man but neglects to show the usual welcoming courtesies that include having his guest's feet washed and anointed. A disreputable but repentant woman in their midst extends the courtesy of washing the feet of Jesus with her tears and drying them with her hair. Jesus ignores the rule that a rabbi is not supposed to have contact with someone of her reputation. After telling a parable about forgiveness, Jesus points out that she who repented of her sins deserves mercy and compassion while Simon as his host offers no hospitality to him nor does he have any compassion for the woman. Simon is so preoccupied with keeping the law that he ignores the point that loving your neighbor as yourself means showing mercy to a repentant sinner.

The first step in repentance is to acknowledge our error and shortcomings. In the words of the general confession, *we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and have done those things which we ought not to have done.* (Book of Common Prayer, page 41-42) We assume responsibility for our sins of omission and commission and can neither plead ignorance nor attempt to rationalize our actions.

Those who took part in the murderous holocaust in Nazi Germany under Hitler as well as those involved in the slaughter of millions in Soviet Russia under Stalin could not plead innocence. It is a mystery how so many people can take part in an act of genocide against a whole population before anything is done to stop it. Terrorists who set off roadside bombs and suicide bombers who wreak havoc prove the bitter lesson of history that acts of terror and war bring out the savage nature in humanity.

Christ calls us from acting out of the lowest common denominator to reach for the highest ethic of forgiving even our enemies. If this seems contrary to human nature, it is what God demands of us. To forgive is to put an offense behind us. It is just as arrogant and manipulative to refuse to accept an apology as to refuse to give one. To continue to chastise people for an offense leaves them feeling helpless and angry.

Forgiveness does not condone an offense. What it does is to set us free. In forgiving another we set ourselves free from our hurt, anger and resentment. As long as we refuse to forgive, we allow ourselves to be held hostage to our own oppression. To renounce anger and resentment is to free ourselves by disowning it.

Forgiveness and vengeance are opposite ends of the spectrum. Forgiveness releases and frees us; vengeance lets anger rule our actions. Forgiveness overrules hatred and resentment because it is stronger, braver and wiser and requires intelligence and discipline. Rather than a weakness, it shows strength of character. We must always beware of seeking justice when it is revenge in disguise. Attempting to settle a score by getting even makes you the loser because it is done so out of hate and anger.

The hardest thing to forgive in others is often what bothers us about ourselves. I'm not sure why we torture ourselves with guilt over what we have done or haven't done. A certain amount of guilt may be necessary to motivate us to do what we need to do, but to continue to feel guilty is not to accept God's own forgiveness.

Can a sin be forgiven if it is not acknowledged? Those who have no apparent conscience about right and wrong bear no responsibility for their offenses and feel no need for forgiveness. It is not up to us to judge unrepentant people with no apparent conscience. It is enough to be aware of our own failings without pointing out those of others.

God is far greater than our inability to comprehend human nature. We may not know nor understand human ways, but we can always trust God's way. It is the same angry pride that keeps us from admitting our offenses that prevents us from forgiving others. We have to be secure enough to admit to our mistakes to forgive others of theirs. The plain and simple fact is that we must forgive if we accept our own forgiveness.

There comes a time when each of us must give an account of ourselves and confront our failings, our lack of faithfulness and our unwillingness to be compassionate. Christ is our best example of compassion and mercy.

When David acknowledged that what he did was wrong, the prophet Nathan assured him that the Lord had put away his sin. Our Book of Common Prayer has an order of Reconciliation of a Penitent or Confession. (Page 448). It is not widely used, but is there for you if you want to get something off your conscience and be assured of God's forgiveness. After declaring God's absolution, the priest assures the penitent, "The Lord has put away all your sins" and concludes with, "Go in peace, and pray for me, a sinner."