

Sermon

Sunday, February 24, 2019

Charleston, SC

8:00 am & 10:30 am Sermon ~ Exodus 32:1-14, John 14:15-18

The Radical Nature of Forgiveness

The Rev. Al Zadig, Jr.

It was the most bizarre visual I had ever seen! As my eyes told me the story, my mind refused to believe it! It happened some years ago when we were living in Washington. My wife and I were bicycling through crowded traffic on Connecticut Avenue, and I noticed out of the corner of my eye another bicyclist with a baby in a bike seat, weaving and swerving aggressively through traffic. In that instant I remember thinking, he's driving like a maniac, that poor baby! And that's when it happened. As he passed me, and with cars moving around us on every side, his son's seat, with the child in it, comes off the back of the bike, goes straight up in the air, then comes crashing down head first on the busy street. My wife retrieved the baby seat from the street and I had to catch up with the man and yell, "Your son fell off the bike!" He didn't even know. As my eyes told me the story, my mind refused to believe it! We call the ambulance and the medics whisk the child from the bike seat onto a stretcher and off to the hospital. The miracle was that the boy wasn't run over in rush hour traffic, and, because he had a helmet, he survived. I got the man's number, called him that night to check in, and the baby seemed to be okay.

As my eyes told me the story, my mind refused to believe it!

This is the same reaction I get every time I read Exodus 32. Exodus 32 is a train wreck of a story that causes my draw to drop! By Exodus 32, the Jews have been rescued over and over by God. Here is our Exodus rescue score card:

1. God protects the Jews by giving them a leader in Moses.
2. God saves the Jews from 12 plagues including **the death of all first born sons**
3. God then delivers the 600,000 Jews from the gigantic 2 walls of water as

they walked on dry ground through the Red Sea

4. God then provides daily water and manna

They should be praising and worshiping God day and night right? NO! They betray and walk away from God. As my eyes told me the story, my mind refused to believe it!

Twelve full chapters before Chapter 32, God brings Moses to the top of Mt. Sinai for an extended month-long boot camp on leadership. God during that month trains Moses on the Ten Commandments, the Covenant Code, how to settle legal disputes, how to make the Arc of the Covenant, how to make the Tabernacle, how to make offerings, what kinds of vestments the clergy should wear, and how to ordain priests. God and Moses are getting it done on Mt. Sinai, creating a new nation with new laws and a new way of life. It also shows God desires to communicate Himself and to be in relationship with His people. It's why the very first thing God says to Moses when giving the Ten Commandments is, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt and slavery, you shall have no other gods before me."

Well, the old saying is true. When the cat's away, the mice will play. While Moses is in leadership school, the Jews say, "Hey, maybe God swallowed up Moses whole, he may never come back. Great idea, let's make other gods who can go before us." As my eyes told me the story, my mind refused to believe it! It gets worse! Aaron, the brother of Moses and interim leader says, "I've got an even better idea, give me all your gold and I will make a golden calf and we can have a festival and make sacrifices!" NO WORDS! Aaron, the representative of God and Moses, capitulating, letting the crowd lead him to sin, instead of preserving the crowd from sin!

It tells us right here that evangelism works in only one direction. Either we are transforming culture, or we are being transformed BY the culture. Aaron is evangelized by the culture, and in doing so, utterly betrays Moses and God.

AND God is enraged! His anger so hot, He says, "Step aside Moses and let me consume them and give you a new people." Which tells us how much God hates sin. God despises being two timed by his people as they pursue other gods. God despises being betrayed.

Then there is Moses. His anger burns so hot he literally throws the stone tablets of the ten commandments to the ground and breaks them. Then he throttles his second in command Aaron.

But what is such a surprise is that Moses, with all that anger, fights for his people before God.

As my eyes told me the story, my mind refused to believe it! Yes, Moses becomes their advocate by saying, "Oh God, though they are radical sinners and not worthy of one who would fight for them, You saved them already. Turn from your fierce anger and relent." And here is the most bizarre scene of them all. God hears Moses, and relents. God forgives them! Why does God relent? Remember this about God. God changes his behavior to remain consistent with His nature. When God wanted to destroy the people, He was acting consistently with His nature of justice. When Moses interceded before God on behalf of the people, God relented in order to act consistently with His nature of forgiveness and mercy. Breathtaking!

Yet, there is something else going on here. Moses serves as the mediator between man and God.

Moses advocates for these ungrateful wretches, asking forgiveness on the part of these fickle people, and God, being merciful, forgives! My friends, as bizarre and as fickle as the Jews are, and especially that heretic Aaron, we are too. Fickle, feeble, and frail. Have there been times in your life where you've gone to bed, stared at the ceiling and said to yourself, "I can't believe I did that?" After all I know about God and his son Jesus, I can't believe I messed up so badly.

My friends, what the train wreck of Exodus 32 tells us, is that, as humans, we have this built-in DNA of sin, able to blunder in breathtaking ways! From giving in to lust to worshiping other gods, yes we have idols. An idol is anything that comes before God as a priority in our life. Yes, our jobs, hobbies, material stuff, even our kids and grandkids can become idols. Anything other than God being first in our life is an idol.

Therefore, we too like the Jews need a mediator, and while Moses is long gone, God gave us another. Paul to Timothy in 1 Timothy Chapter 2, puts it like this, "There is one God and one Mediator, who can reconcile God and humanity, the man Jesus Christ." Jesus Christ, the new Moses, who has given the Holy Spirit to be our advocate, fighting for us, interceding for us, and forgiving us!

My friends, we've all been where the Jews were that day as Moses came off the mountain. God's love is so great, He gives the Jews a mediator in Moses. God's love for you and me is so great, He's given us the rescuer Jesus. Which means we too can be forgiven. While it isn't in us to forgive others, it's in Jesus to forgive others. If we have received Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, Jesus in us, Then we are through His power able to forgive others and be forgiven! If we say, I could never be forgiven, or I can't forgive, or, what they did was just too much of a betrayal, I will never forgive that person. That's normal for a secular person, but that means there is no Jesus in us. You might come to church every Sunday, but Jesus has not taken root in your heart. As you and I continue to be discipled, our very human nature changes from one that is fickle, and feeble, to one that begins taking on the nature of Jesus. What is His Nature? His nature is to forgive and restore. That nature must replace our human nature. So that not only can we be forgiven, but we in turn are given the power

to forgive others. God changes his behavior to remain consistent with His nature, and through Jesus, so must we.

Who could forget from the Emmanuel 9, The Rev. Anthony Thompson, whose wife was killed during the mother Emmanuel tragedy. Everyone, including some Christians, thought he was crazy to forgive. Until Thompson said this, "Forgiveness is our nature as Christians, it's what we do!" Remember what forgiveness is and is not. Forgiveness is not about letting the bad guy off the hook, it's about taking that hook out of your own heart. Forgiveness is setting yourself free and saying, "God, it's up to you to bring justice, and revenge" Therefore, unforgiveness is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die. Therefore, today is the day from our knees to say, "Jesus, fill me with the power of the Holy Spirit, take control of my life. Be my mediator to God. Forgive me of my sins. Enable to me to forgive others."

Finally this morning, St. Michaelite David Richardson learned this through his daughter and has given me permission to share his story. David writes, "My oldest daughter was 32 and she had been a heroin addict since she was 20. She had just been arrested for the third time and had been sent away to a long term addiction rehab center. Although I really loved my daughter, there was an anger and bitterness deep down in my soul for the hurt and suffering she had put our family through because of her addiction problems. It was that passive aggressive, subtle anger that wounds those you love most. I didn't want it; in fact, I hated it, but it was in my heart, and I expressed it to my family, especially to my daughter's children who were living with us since we won custody. But it was at the end of a Healing Prayer class, as I sat quietly, the Holy Spirit directed me to ask for God's forgiveness because I was always working and away when she was little and needed me most. I also prayed for Jesus' healing power to free my daughter from her addiction. As I prayed, instantly, I felt something I had never felt before. A warm sensation came over me and a vision and picture of my daughter when she was a little girl came into my mind; it was as clear as if she was sitting right in front of me. In my vision, someone dressed in a white robe reached down and gently picked her up to hold her. At first, I couldn't see the face of the person that was holding her. Soon, however, the face became clear. She laid her

head against His chest and looked back at me over her left shoulder with a smile, and a peace and joy that I have never seen in her face. The face I saw holding her was the face of our Lord, Jesus Christ. I began to weep uncontrollably and I didn't stop weeping for what seemed a long time. They were not tears of sadness but tears of joy; at that instant I knew I was forgiven by Jesus. Jesus had healed my heart and I knew that he would also heal my daughter's addiction. All the resentment, anger, and bitterness towards my daughter melted away. It was now totally clear what Jesus meant in Mathew 11:28 that I had read a hundred times or more. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." The following week, the Holy Spirit prompted me to sit down and write a letter asking for my daughter's forgiveness. I also forgave her for all the hurt and anguish she had put me and my family through due to the bad choices she had made. My daughter shared my letter with the Director of the rehab center and asked her to share it with everyone. The Director called me to tell me that, as a result of my letter, a young man had wept and made a decision to forgive his father for abusing him. Jesus was good to His Word and promise. My daughter has been free from her addiction for more than 10 years."

As my eyes told me the story, my mind refused to believe it! Jesus is so good. Fighting for us. Interceding for us. Forgiving us! My friends, today is a day for honesty. If you are here today and say, "It is not in me to forgive," pray for the power of your mediator Jesus to come into your insides and give you the power to do so.