

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, April 25, 2021

Hymns: 304 – We Praise You, Creator; 774 – Freely, freely; Be Glorified;
751 – Forgive Our Sins As We Forgive

Scripture: Matthew 6:12-15; Acts 21:7-16

Sermon Title: The Power of Forgiveness

Matthew 6:12-15 (New Living Translation)

Forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us.

And don't let us yield to temptation, but rescue us from the evil one.

If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Acts 21:7-16 (New Living Translation)

The next stop after leaving Tyre was Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and sisters and stayed for one day. The next day we went on to Caesarea and stayed at the home of Philip the Evangelist, one of the seven men who had been chosen to distribute food. He had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy.

I want to share with you this morning one of the most powerful verses in all the New Testament – a verse about forgiveness. Maybe, next to Jesus' own words from the cross, the most powerful example of forgiveness in all the Bible. If you are ready, here it is: *“The next day we went on to Caesarea and stayed at the home of Philip the Evangelist.”* Maybe you were expecting more, but that's it: *The next day we went on to Caesarea and stayed at the home of Philip the Evangelist.*

In order for us to understand the power behind this seemingly simply little line, we need a little background. We need to know something about the main players in this drama, about what brought them together, what tore them apart, what brought them together again. The main players are Philip and Paul, but we're going to get some help from some others, including a deacon named Stephen, a doctor named Luke, and a Saviour named Jesus. Let's take a closer look. Let's start with Philip.

There are in fact three Philips in the Bible, but one of them, Philip the Tetrarch, a son of Herod, does not concern us today. Another, the Apostle Philip, Philip of Bethsaida, friend of Andrew and Peter, is one of the very first disciples whom Jesus called. But that's not our Philip either.

We meet our Philip, this new Philip, in Acts chapter 6. Here's what's happening: The church is just starting out; it is less than five years since the Resurrection of Jesus. Many of those accepting the message of Jesus are widows, orphans, and other folks in need of social assistance. The church, to its great credit, took it upon itself to provide food relief to these needy souls. There are two main groups of people becoming

Christians; Aramaic-speaking Jews, from the Jerusalem area, and Greek-speaking Jews, from away. The Greek-speakers are under the impression that the Aramaic-speakers are getting preferential treatment when it comes to the distribution of food. It is the old “local versus away” argument all over again. Peter, never the most patient of fellows to begin with, is soon frustrated with all of this bickering, and is quickly becoming overwhelmed with the administration of the whole affair. With that background, here’s the reading (Acts 6:1-7):

A lot of people were now becoming followers of the Lord. But some of the ones who spoke Greek started complaining about the ones who spoke Aramaic. They complained that the Greek-speaking widows were not given their share when the food supplies were handed out each day.

The twelve apostles called the whole group of followers together and said, "We should not give up preaching God's message in order to serve at tables. My friends, choose seven men who are respected and wise and filled with God's Spirit. We will put them in charge of these things. We can spend our time praying and serving God by preaching." This suggestion pleased everyone, and they began by choosing Stephen. He had great faith and was filled with the Holy Spirit. Then they chose Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and also Nicolaus, who worshiped with the Jewish people in Antioch. These men were brought to the apostles. Then the apostles prayed and placed their hands on the men to show that they had been chosen to do this work. God's message spread, and many more people in Jerusalem became followers.

Notice that one of the fellows they choose to help the Twelve Apostles is a man named Philip. He makes quite an impression on Luke, who tells a series of Philip stories, including an extensive one about an encounter with an Ethiopian government official who becomes a Christian. Philip, in following Jesus’ earlier footsteps through Samaria, makes quite an impact (Acts 8:5-8):

Philip went to the city of Samaria and told the people about Christ. They crowded around Philip because they were eager to hear what he was saying and to see him work miracles. Many people with evil spirits were healed, and the spirits went out of them with a shout. A lot of crippled and lame people were also healed. Everyone in that city was very glad because of what was happening.

But what is Philip doing in Samaria? Why isn’t he in Jerusalem, helping with the distribution of food? Well, then as now, as soon as something wonderful is happening, somebody somewhere is going to try to put a stop to it. Remember that one of the Deacons chosen to serve was a friend of Philip named Stephen? Here’s what happened to him (Acts 6:8-7:1):

God gave Stephen the power to work great miracles and wonders among the people. But some... started arguing with Stephen... They turned the people and their leaders and the teachers of the Law of Moses against Stephen. Then they all grabbed Stephen and dragged him in front of the council.

Some men agreed to tell lies about Stephen, and they said, "This man keeps on saying terrible things about this holy temple and the Law of Moses. We have heard him claim that Jesus from Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses gave us." Then all the council members stared at Stephen. They saw that his face looked like the face of an angel.

The high priest asked Stephen, "Is what they say true?"

And Stephen says, "You bet it is," and gives them a no-holds-barred sermon to that effect, right between the eyes, ending with this memorable line (Acts 7:51-60):

"You stubborn and hardheaded people! You are always fighting against the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors did. Is there one prophet that your ancestors didn't mistreat? They killed the prophets who told about the coming of the One Who Obeys God. And now you have turned against him and killed him. Angels gave you God's Law, but you still don't obey it."

When the council members heard Stephen's speech, they were angry and furious. But Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit. He looked toward heaven, where he saw our glorious God and Jesus standing at his right side. Then Stephen said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right side of God!" The council members shouted and covered their ears. At once they all attacked Stephen and dragged him out of the city. Then they started throwing stones at him. The men who had brought charges against him put their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul (or Paul). As Stephen was being stoned to death, he called out, "Lord Jesus, please welcome me!" He knelt down and shouted, "Lord, don't blame them for what they have done." Then he died.

But don't forget this next line, on which our story hinges (Acts 8:1): *"And Saul (or Paul) was there, giving approval to his death."* And not only that (Acts 8:1-4): *On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.*

Philip was among those who scattered, ending up in Samaria, and eventually, we are told, in the seaside town of Caesarea, where he lived together with his four daughters, who themselves had a reputation for great spirituality. Of Philip's wife, we are told nothing. But of Paul, his story continues (Acts 9:1-19 - The Message)

All this time Saul was breathing down the necks of the Master's disciples, out for the kill. He went to the Chief Priest and got arrest warrants to take to the meeting places in Damascus so that if he found anyone there belonging to the Way, whether men or women, he could arrest them and bring them to Jerusalem.

He set off. When he got to the outskirts of Damascus, he was suddenly dazed by a blinding flash of light. As he fell to the ground, he heard a voice: "Saul, Saul, why are you out to get me?"

He said, "Who are you, Master?"

"I am Jesus, the One you're hunting down. I want you to get up and enter the city. In the city you'll be told what to do next."

His companions stood there dumbstruck—they could hear the sound, but couldn't see anyone—while Saul, picking himself up off the ground, found himself stone-blind. They had to take him by the hand and lead him into Damascus. He continued blind for three days. He ate nothing, drank nothing.

There was a disciple in Damascus by the name of Ananias. The Master spoke to him in a vision: "Ananias, get up and go over to Straight Avenue. Ask at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus. His name is Saul. He's there praying. He has just had a dream in which he saw a man named Ananias enter the house and lay hands on him so he could see again."

Ananias protested, "Master, you can't be serious. Everybody's talking about this man and the terrible things he's been doing, his reign of terror against your people in Jerusalem! And now he's shown up here with papers from the Chief Priest that give him license to do the same to us."

But the Master said, "Don't argue. Go! I have picked him as my personal representative to non-Jews and kings and Jews. And now I'm about to show him what he's in for—the hard suffering that goes with this job."

So Ananias went and found the house, placed his hands on blind Saul, and said, "Brother Saul, the Master sent me, the same Jesus you saw on your way here. He sent me so you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." No sooner were the words out of his mouth than something like scales fell from Saul's eyes—he could see again! He got to his feet, was baptized, and sat down with them to a hearty meal.

Saul spent a few days getting acquainted with the Damascus disciples, but then went right to work, wasting no time, preaching in the meeting places that this Jesus was the Son of God. They were caught off guard by this and, not at all sure they could trust him, they kept saying, "Isn't this the man who wreaked havoc in Jerusalem among the believers? And didn't he come here to do the same thing—arrest us and drag us off to jail in Jerusalem for sentencing by the high priests?"

Yes - this was the Saul who would become the Paul we know so well. Mind you, given his background, it took the people of the early church a number of years before they would trust him. Trust, however, is one thing; forgiveness is another.

And you might remember that this sermon is about forgiveness. For those with very good memories, you might remember this, from 10 minutes or so ago: “there is a line in the reading this morning that tells one of the most powerful stories of forgiveness in all the New Testament: *The next day we went on to Caesarea and stayed at the home of Philip the Evangelist.* And now that you’ve had a little back story, think about what this line means: Paul, formerly Saul, persecutor of the church, conspirator in the cold-blooded murder of the Deacon Stephen, is now the missionary Paul, founder of many congregations, writer of the letters which would become the second part of the New Testament, servant and apostle of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. And he is in Caesarea, staying in the home, of all people, of Philip and his four daughters; Philip whose friend and coworker Stephen, Paul had a hand in killing.

Imagine that scene in Caesarea. We don’t even know if Philip and Paul had even laid eyes upon one another, since that day in Jerusalem when “*Saul gave approval to Stephen’s death.*” What we do know is this: Both men had experienced the forgiveness of God through salvation in Jesus Christ. Both men knew what it was for the Saviour of the World to suffer and die for them. Both men knew what it was to be set free from their past, to see their sins washed away, to begin life anew. Both men knew it to the degree that they dedicated the rest of their days to sharing this incredible news with others.

And now there is a knock on the door, and Philip’s youngest girl runs to see who it might be. And now a stranger stands in Philip’s doorway, the light of the Mediterranean sun behind him, making a shadow of his face. And now Philip rises to his feet, squinting at the stranger in the door. And now Paul steps in, Luke close on his heels, and Philip sees the face he had seen those years ago, the face of Saul the persecutor, the face he had seen nodding approval as cruel rocks fell upon his dearest friend, of Stephen, who looked to all like an angel, the light of life fading from his eyes even as the glory of heaven shone brightly through.

And now Paul’s eyes which fill with tears, eyes once struck blind by the heavenly light of the Messiah whose glory knocked him off his horse and into a new life; and through these tears he looks into the face of one he once swore to hunt down and kill like vermin. And now Paul says, “Philip, forgive me.” And now Philip, the eyes of his daughters wide upon him, the hand of Luke writing it down, the breath of all in the room held and waiting; and now Philip says, “Welcome, Paul. Welcome to my home. You are forgiven. We are all forgiven. Welcome, brother. Welcome home.”

To confess our belief in the power of forgiveness means to confess not only our belief that God has the power to forgive our sins, but it means also to confess our belief that we have the power to forgive one another. To believe one is to believe both. For Jesus, to believe the one means we must believe the other; to believe in the forgiveness

of our own sins, we must be ready to forgive others, and to seek forgiveness from them. It is all one. It is inseparable. And it is possible only because of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ, it is possible only because of the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through us as we both give and seek the gift of forgiveness.

You have experienced the forgiveness of God through salvation in Jesus Christ. You know what it is for the Saviour of the World to suffer and die for you. You know what it is to be set free from your past, to see your sins washed away, to begin life anew. You know these things. You confess them. You believe them. And now: who do you need to forgive? From whom do you need to seek forgiveness? How can you, with the help of the Holy Spirit; how can you, through giving and seeking forgiveness, make this circle complete? Is there somewhere you are no longer welcome? Is there someone you need to welcome home?

It is possible. It is necessary. It is what we confess, it is what we believe. “We believe in the Holy Spirit,” we confess in our Creed, “the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints, the Forgiveness of Sins.” We know it. We believe it. Do we do it?

Or maybe you do not know these things. Perhaps you have not experienced the forgiveness of God through salvation in Jesus Christ. Perhaps you do not know what it is for the Saviour of the World to suffer and die for you. Perhaps you do not know what it is to be set free from your past, to see your sins washed away, to begin life anew. That is possible, too. It is possible for the Holy Spirit to work that miracle in you, even as it was worked in the hard and bitter heart of Saul. It is possible, as you experience God’s forgiveness, to find forgiveness for another in your heart. It is possible right here. Right now. Let us pray.

Father, we come to you for forgiveness, in the name of Jesus Christ. We come knowing that forgiveness is possible, because of what Jesus has done in dying for us. We come, knowing that new life is possible for us, even as Jesus is risen again. We come, knowing that you know what we have done, what we have failed to do, but confident that you love us all the same. Forgive us our sins, we pray. Set us on the path of salvation, the path of a new start, a new beginning, a new life. Fill us with your Holy Spirit. Bring to our minds, place upon our hearts, those from whom we need to seek forgiveness, and those we need to forgive. Help us to share our new life with them. Help us to welcome them. As you welcome us, father, so help us to welcome them home. We ask in the strong and compassionate name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.