

FORGIVEN IN ORDER TO BECOME

Mark 1: 4-11

Here's what happened to me one Sunday after church in a former congregation. After greeting everyone at the back, I walked through the sanctuary on my way to the hall for coffee and fellowship, and I noticed someone I had never seen before sitting in the back pew. I introduced myself. His name was Derek. He looked like someone in his mid-30s. He told me his story. Things had come easy in life for Derek. He had gone through university, graduated with a degree in graphic design and got a great job in a marketing firm with lots of promise for promotion. He was given a good salary which kept increasing year after year. He put a down payment on a condo, bought himself a sports car and met an attractive woman he started dating. Everything was going his way.

10 years into this life, however, Derek began to feel an emptiness inside. He felt he was living a false life and not one that was truly authentic. He began to get depressed. People started noticing. The quality of his work began to suffer. His relationships started to fail and eventually he was on medical leave with a diagnosis of clinical depression. But some months into this time he remembered his youth when his parents brought him to church. He started to wonder whether the missing ingredient in his life was of a spiritual nature. Where would he begin his spiritual quest but church? And so, here he was.

After some further conversation with Derek it became clear that he also felt a certain unworthiness inside. He had fulfilled the dream society told him to pursue but it was not his dream. He was trying to prove himself according to some standard that was not his own. Why did he need to do that? How would he make some amends to those he had hurt along the way and the relationships he had neglected? How would he find his purpose now and build a life that was more genuine?

Now before we pursue a search for some answers to Derek's questioning, let me tell you about another person I came to know named Lewis. Lewis was a senior who had moved into a residence near the church I was ministering at. He came to me because his kids had told him he needed some grief counselling. Lewis had suffered a lot of loss in a short period of time. His wife of 60 years had died after a prolonged illness which included both cancer and dementia. Lewis had been her primary caregiver. And after her death the kids had moved quickly to have Lewis sell the family home they had shared for 50 years as the upkeep was too much. Now Lewis was in a place where he knew no one and having to nurse the multiple losses of a spouse and a home within the span of a year. No wonder he was grieving.

But meeting with Lewis over a few visits I also recognized that Lewis' grief was a complicated one. For all he had tried to give to his spouse, he felt he had failed her in some way. For all the patience and loving support he tried to give day in and day out, there were times when he had simply lost his patience and felt resentful toward her. How could God forgive him if he couldn't forgive himself? How could he make amends now as it was all too late?

The Protestant Reformer Martin Luther taught that the greatest sin we humans must overcome is not pride or selfishness or hate or indifference, or even greed. No. The greatest sin beyond all these was what he called: unbelief. What did Luther mean by unbelief? Unbelief is a failure to believe and to trust that you are loved. For all the imperfect humanity, for all the failure and the flaws, for all the woundedness and brokenness whether you blame others or yourself or both, to believe in God and to trust in God is to believe and trust that you are loved now as you have always been loved fully and completely no matter what you have done or failed to do. Believing and trusting in love has to be the starting point for any change, growth and journey toward wholeness. Failing to trust that you are so loved is the root cause for most other sins. Isn't this something?

And to see this a little more clearly and how it may apply to each of us as much as to Derek and Lewis, let's take a dive into our scripture reading this morning in search of revelatory insight.

Jesus is baptized by John and his baptism becomes the beginning of his coming out publicly as the messiah of God. But in order to understand what happens to Jesus and what he hears from God spoken deep into his soul, we need to understand John's message and how it's connected to Jesus' coming out. John's message is a simple one: repent for the forgiveness of sins. Unfortunately, we have been taught to hear this message all wrong. We have been taught to put the accent on repentance thereby also making the forgiveness of sins conditional. We have been taught to hear John's message as appealing to fear in people. If you don't repent, you will not be forgiven, and a worse fate will await you than the sorry lives you're already living. You will end up in hell and once you're in hell it will be too late to repent.

But let's step back for a moment. Why did people think of John as a prophet and find his message all about freedom and hope for a new day? And why were the authorities threatened by John, seeking to bring him down? If all John was doing was threatening and guilting people to repent of their sins, that was the same message the religious authorities used against the people to keep them down. Guilt and shame based on fear are great spiritual weapons against a population limiting how much force you need to use to keep them down. Tyrants and corrupt spiritual leaders have used fear, blame, guilt and shame to keep people down from the beginning of time.

But what if the accent of John was on forgiveness of sins? And what if the sin he was primarily pointing to for the people was unbelief? What if the change that repentance was supposed to ignite was about people embracing the prophetic claim that God's forgiveness is there for the receiving? And what if forgiveness is love that is ready to embrace people despite their flaws, mistakes and shortcomings? God is ready to do a new thing in you and among us, John is proclaiming, but you must repent of the false guilt, shame, blame and fear that totally block you from receiving God's love. You don't need the authorities blessing or declaration that you are fully and completely forgiven. They don't control God. God has already declared you infinitely precious and beloved. Until you receive this deep in your soul you will not be liberated to come together, better love one another and work together to build a better world beginning within your own communities. This is the revolution John was igniting and the authorities were rightly threatened by him.

And so, this also makes perfect sense of how Jesus hears and receives John's message personally. What does repentance mean for Jesus? He doesn't need to repent of greed or selfishness or hate or indifference. No. But he needs to rise up and come out publicly to lead the revolution of God's love as Messiah. It's all about the kingdom of God against the kingdoms of the world. Love and justice against fear, control through violence, greed, selfishness, hate and corruption. Salvation is about a personal release, freedom from bondage, empowerment to rise up and claim your identity before God against any counter claim over you by the authorities.

Salvation is also about finding your purpose and the special way you and only you may serve God's love through the human being you are. Your weaknesses and limitations may become strengths in a unique kind of way. You may offer a special kind of empathy and compassion because you know what it's like to be broken by suffering and loss. You may be able to bring special joy to others because of the joy that will be unleashed in you. You may be able to understand how to better include and recognize others because you know something of what it feels like to be excluded and silenced. You may know something about struggle and freedom with an addiction or obsession and can better support someone else so trapped.

But the ingredient essential to turning and changing a wound into a blessing is trusting how deeply you are loved and cherished, and how deeply God forgives any sin that becomes a barrier to love flowing in and through you.

And so, with this understanding it is no surprise that Jesus sees the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit coming to him on the wings of a bird, and he hears God's voice speak within him: You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

While Jesus' identity as messiah is unique to him, the word of God spoken into him is not. God seeks to communicate this very message to each one of us too: "You are my child, my beloved; with you I am well pleased."

But preacher! We're not Jesus! No, we're not. But think about Jesus at this point. These words are spoken to him even before he has done anything. Up to this point he has lived a private life. Between his birth and his coming out at the age of 30 we know nothing about Jesus. What has he done to deserve such a special declaration of pure love from God? Nothing. And that's the point. This declaration of love which Jesus internalizes in a new way through John's message of repentance, becomes the fire that lights Jesus' soul and fuels his ministry going forward. And this is the same for each one of us too.

You are called to repent, to turn away from your unbelief, to trust that you are infinitely loved, forgiven of the ways you have failed to be the human God created you to be. Rise up and claim this love within yourself and see how God may call you to serve as the unique human being you are with all your struggles as well as your hopes and dreams. How may your hurts and wounds be converted to blessings for the service of compassion? How may your voice be heard through words, a special activity, an art, some volunteering, or reaching out to a neighbour, friend or family member? How may you speak openly or look within more deeply and forgive yourself for being a human being with limits and imperfections? How may you stand up for yourself or alongside another on behalf of a greater justice?

Jesus' baptism by John ignites a fire in Jesus. His journey begins and it will change the world. How may your rediscovery of faith, a faith that you are deeply, unconditionally and infinitely loved by the creator of all, shape this next chapter of your life beginning now? How may you live your days and your service a little differently because your faith in your belovedness by God has been renewed and strengthened? How may you confront the people and the situations that have kept you down with grace even as truth must be spoken more openly and clearly?

Derek continued to come to church for a while. He began to connect with people and I could see him become more comfortable in his skin and in himself. He smiled more and even laughed more. Something was happening to be sure. Eventually he moved on and I hope and pray his journey of freedom through a deeper spiritual grounding has continued.

Lewis eventually accepted love and forgave himself. He became more involved in the community of his residence and even became a leader and spokesperson on behalf of the residents with the administration. He made meaningful friendships and he joined groups at our church that were social in nature but also bible study discussions. Lewis lived a full life again even as his mobility declined over time and even as he continued to grieve the loss of his beloved spouse.

So what about you and me? Do we need to repent of our unbelief? Do we need to absorb much more deeply in faith that we are truly loved and forgiven of everything that has been a

barrier to our richer flourishing? Do we need to rise up and claim our purpose at this time of our lives, and the particular ways God may be calling us as the humans we are with all the special circumstances of our lives? Do we need to discover the gifts in us right now because of who we are and all that has brought us here, the good and the bad?

May God above, beside and within open us up and lead us in faith on this next chapter of our human journey as beloved children of God and cherished siblings of Christ... Amen.