

Today is traditionally Palm Sunday when we remember Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem by waving palm branches and singing "Hosanna, Loud Hosanna." Unfortunately due to the coronavirus, we can't come together on this special day; so just visualize us waving those palm branches in this sanctuary and singing at the top of our voices.

As you study all four gospels, you see that ever since His birth in Bethlehem, Jesus had set His eyes on Jerusalem and His destiny with the cross. The Gospel of John tells us that on Palm Sunday Jesus received the kind of welcome that we all hope that He would receive from this world. The disciples placed their garments on the donkey for a saddle, and people spread their coats along the road while others waved palm branches to prepare the way for Jesus' arrival into Jerusalem. Not only that but the crowd shouted: "Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord."

Now "Hosanna" means "save us." And that is exactly why Jesus came to live among us. Remember what the angel told Joseph in Matthew 1:21 – "Mary will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins." We often refer to Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem as the Triumphant Entry. In the ancient world and even today, we have parades for conquering heroes. Of course, Jesus' real victory had not come yet; He still had to endure the betrayal by Judas, the desertion of the disciples, an illegal trial before the Sanhedrin, the denial by Peter, the judgment before Pilate, and the crucifixion before the victory on Easter morning. Now the word triumph implies victory or conquering. Jesus not only defeated death, but He also conquered sin. Thus, Jesus fulfilled His mission; He saved us from ourselves and our sins.

There's a story about an old preacher who was dying. So he called for his lawyer and his doctor, both members of his congregation, to come visit him before he died. As they entered his bedroom he motioned for them to take a seat, one on each side of his bed. He then grasped the hand of each one of them. They sat there for a while in silence; both men remembering his long sermons on greed, pride and bad behavior that made them squirm in their seats. Finally, the doctor asked the old preacher why he asked them to come. With all his strength and in a weak voice, he replied: "Well, Jesus died between two thieves and that's how I want to go."

Sin is probably the nastiest word in the Bible and among Christians. No one likes to hear that word. Many churches never mention it in order to be sensitive to visitors and to not upset their current members. The primary word for sin in the New Testament comes from a term used by archers that meant "to miss the mark." This was an excellent illustration of what sin is, particularly in a day when people hunted with bows and arrows. Just as an archer's arrow

might miss the intended target, so we as human beings miss the target in how we live our daily lives.

Jesus set the target to which we are to strive for, but unfortunately, as we know from experience, we all fall short. As the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 3:23 – “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” We have all treated others poorly, been self-centered, and failed to do justice and practice loving-kindness. Jesus Christ sets the standard that we are to strive for each day; He is our target. Because we sin and miss the mark daily – saying, thinking, or doing things we should not have done, or failing to say, think, or do things we should have done – we all find ourselves in need of God’s forgiveness.

From personal experience, we all know how hard it is to stay on target; it is a daily struggle. Listen to how the Apostle Paul recorded this struggle in the seventh chapter of Romans, verses 14 through 25.

Read Romans 7:14-25

In this passage, Paul is baring his very soul. He knew what was right and wanted to do it; and yet, somehow he never could. He knew what was wrong and that was the last thing that he wanted to do; and yet for some reason, he did it anyway. It was as if he had a split personality; two extremely different personalities – a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde – in him each pulling in different directions. He found himself indulging in things that he didn’t want to do, and doing things that he hated. He was haunted by a feeling of frustration; his ability to see what was good and his inability to do anything about it; and his ability to recognize what was wrong and his inability to refrain from doing it.

In this thought provoking passage, Paul is describing the struggle of the two natures within each believer: the old self and the new self; the old habits and the new ways of Jesus. There are times when we all want to cry out with Paul: “What a wretched person I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” Paul mourns about being trapped in a body determined to sin. He seems to be crying out: “I’m a good guy trapped in a sin suit, and I can’t find the zipper!” But in verse 25 Paul provides the answer to his problem and the problem we all face each day: “Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Jesus came to save us from sin and to give us the gift of forgiveness.

Over the past four weeks we have been studying the belief statements in the Apostles’ Creed. Last week we discussed our belief in the holy catholic church and the communion of saints. So let’s discuss the next statement: “I believe in the forgiveness of sins.” Now while I focus more on our personal relationship with the Lord than sin, there are some churches that are obsessed with convincing people that they are sinners and laying a guilt trip on them. It is also true that

some of the loudest and most vocal Christian voices in our country seem to be preoccupied with pointing out the sins of others.

But that does not reflect the emphasis of the Christian faith as found in the Apostles' Creed. Notice that the Creed does not say: "I believe that all human beings are sinners," though that is assumed. Instead, it says: "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." The emphasis in both the Creed and the Christian faith is not on guilt, but grace; it is not on sin, but on forgiveness. Have you ever thought about it this way; that when we recite these words, we are acknowledging that it is through the grace of God that our sins are forgiven. This is a key point. It is a gift from God; we can't earn it; it is freely given as we sing in the hymn "Freely, Freely."

If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator. If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist. But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior. Through His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus set things right in this life of contradictions where we want to serve God with all our heart, soul and mind, but are pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different. What we cannot do by our own willpower, Jesus can help us accomplish.

Of course, forgiveness is really only effective if we realize we need forgiveness. I know this may be hard for some of us to believe, but none of us are perfect; we all stand in need of God's grace and forgiveness. In other words we need to realize that we have sinned, missed the mark, and then repent and seek God's forgiveness.

Listen to this traditional prayer of confession that is used by Anglicans and Methodists to capture the various ways we sin and to help us understand our need for forgiveness: "Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbor as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent." This prayer is very similar to the prayer we say before receiving communion.

Now our sins can be divided into two groups: sins of commission and sins of omission. Sins of commission are when we knowingly do something we shouldn't do; when we think, say and do the wrong thing. Sins of omission are when we don't do something we should have done; when we fail to think, say or do the right thing; when we miss the opportunities that God gives us to serve and make a difference for Him. Either way, sin is a failure to be or to do what God intends for us as human beings. It's missing the mark.

Now while there may be some people who don't think they need forgiveness and can't see the sin in their own lives, there are other people who are uncertain whether God can or ever will forgive them. There was a lady at our church in Grants who would not take communion for a

long time because she thought she was unworthy to receive the elements. Some people carry the guilt or shame of past experiences or events with them. They think that their past sins are so bad that God could not ever forgive them; of course, this is not true.

At times the awareness of our sin is like being shackled by a heavy burden, like carrying a sack of bricks. We try to carry the load of our guilt and past sins and failures, but Jesus tells us in Matthew 11:28 – “Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” The Greek word used for “forgive” means “to release.” We are asking Jesus to release us from the burden of guilt. We can either choose to continue to carry the burden of our sin and guilt, or we can choose to accept God’s forgiveness and to allow Him to release us from this burden. Jesus is more than willing and ready to forgive our sins and remove any burden of guilt from our hearts and shoulders.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus told parables about God’s willingness to forgive sins. Jesus was even known by His critics as a “friend of sinners.” At the Last Supper, Jesus took the bread and wine and said: “Take and eat. This is my body...Drink from this, all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” As He hung on the cross, Jesus looked at His persecutors and prayed: “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” Then Jesus turned to the thief on the cross and said: “Today you will be with me in paradise.” After His resurrection, Jesus told His disciples that the forgiveness of sins must be preached in His name to all nations. Throughout His ministry, Jesus revealed a God who is more willing to forgive than we are even to ask.

When we say in the Apostles’ Creed “I believe in the forgiveness of sins,” we are affirming the truth that God is willing to forgive us and wants to release us from our burdens. God’s desire is that we repent and turn away from the sins that we have committed and the burdens of sin and guilt that weigh us down. We don’t have to be defined by the worst things we have ever done. Our God is the God of the Second Chance. Ours is a gospel of redemption.

Also when we state that we believe in the forgiveness of sins we are not only saying that we believe that God is willing to forgive our sins, but that we are also willing to forgive the sins of others. Jesus teaches this over and over in the Gospels. In the Lord’s Prayer we say: “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” As we recite this prayer each Sunday, have you ever stopped and considered what you were asking God to do? We are basically asking God to forgive us in the same way, and to the same degree, that we extend forgiveness to others. In the sixth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, after giving His disciples this prayer, Jesus issues a warning: “If you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you don’t forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your sins.” Wow, that’s a powerful statement!

If we are not willing to forgive, in a sense, we are adding to the burden we carry, a burden of bitterness and resentment. You may have heard it said that “holding on to resentment is like drinking poison and hoping the other person gets sick.” We can either get bitter or better. Forgiving others is not saying that what happened didn’t matter; it is saying: “I choose to release you, and I choose to release myself.”

Forgiveness is a central part of our faith. When we confess that we believe in the forgiveness of sins, we are recognizing that all of us need forgiveness; we are affirming that God is willing to forgive our sins; and we are accepting Jesus’ call to forgive others. So take some time today to kneel in prayer and ask God to forgive you, to release you from any guilt that you may have. Also if you are carrying any bitterness in your heart towards someone who has hurt you, give it to God and forgive that person. Then arise free of any burdens; prepared to celebrate the Risen Lord on Easter morning. Amen