



WHAT IF THERE WAS NO FORGIVENESS?

Grace Lutheran Church/Caminando con Jesús

Easter 3 (B)

April 19, 2015

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SERMON TEXT

1 Peter 2:19-24

✝ IN NOMINE JESU ✝

Olivia was born to a working-class family in Chicago. Her dad barely made enough to feed them all, and when he took to the bottle they were that much hungrier. “He was a mean drunk,” Olivia recalled with bitterness, as she remembered how she would cower in the kitchen corner and watch as he kicked her younger siblings across the linoleum floor. She grew up with a hard knot of bitterness inside of her, a tumor of hate over what he had done. And that knot of bitterness only hardened and that tumor only metastasized all throughout her soul, so that she never forgave him, even when years later he repented and yearned for her forgiveness on his death bed.

Olivia swore to herself that she would never be like her father and, well, at least she never drank. But she abused her children, too. Olivia would routinely yell at them, “Shut up! Why did I ever have you stupid kids anyway! You’ve ruined my life!” Some nights she would go around and beat them without warning, because, according to her, “You must have done something wrong sometime.” One night Olivia’s daughter Elizabeth came to her sobbing for some forgettably small infraction, “Momma, I’m sorry, I’m sorry” to which her mother only replied, “You’re not sorry! If you were, you wouldn’t have done it in the first place.”

So, little Liz grows up. Among her life’s goals and ambitions, you can guess which one tops the list, right? To never turn into her mother. But, like her mom, that was one goal she failed to reach. Elizabeth had a son named Michael. Michael was a rebel.

Growing up in the 60s, he embraced the hippie culture of sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Elizabeth tried everything to get through to him—scoldings, threats, kicking him out of the house—but nothing seemed to work. Fed up with him, one day in a fit of rage she told Michael, “I never want to see you again as long as I live.” She’s kept her word. Twenty-six years later she has not seen her son. And after all that time her anger has not subsided; if anything it has intensified. Now, when asked about her son, her jaw clenches, and she says in brazen hate, “I don’t know why God didn’t take him long ago for all he’s done.” Can you believe it? She wishes the child she carried inside her dead!

Two weeks ago, on Easter Sunday, we gathered here for this singular purpose—to grow in our appreciation for Easter and its incomparable blessings for our spiritual and our daily lives. In this tragic story of the horrible unbroken cycle of hurt, bitterness, and hate that crossed generational lines, today I want us all to grow in our appreciation of and in our power to dole out perhaps the key blessing of Easter that Matt West sings about—*Forgiveness*. Again, realizing that you never know what you have till it’s gone, I pose to you this unspeakably terrible ‘What if’ on the basis of Peter’s words—***What if there was no forgiveness?***

So, what about it? What if there was no forgiveness? What if everything we read in today’s Gospel never happened? What if, because he had not risen, Christ Jesus never appeared before his disciples, as Luke reports, and said, “Shalom Legka!” (Peace be with you!) What if what Jesus said at the end of the Gospel would happen, never did? What if repentance for the forgiveness of sins was never preached, and, therefore you never heard and experienced the awesome power of the beautiful words of the absolution—I forgive you?

Well, if there was no *vertical* forgiveness, if there was no forgiveness from God to us, no forgiveness won by the suffering

of his only Son and no forgiveness given to us through the proclamation of that forgiveness, then, we, of course, would be dead to God and doomed to hell. And the portrait of our lives would be that of the disciples huddled behind locked doors on Easter Eve and the title of the portrait would be "Fear." We would live in fear of dying, like a man I know. In a moment of unrestrained honesty he confessed to me that he is absolutely terrified of death; he lives in constant fear of dying. If there was no forgiveness from God we would fear life. In every bad thing that happens to us, we would suffer the gnawing fear that God is not happy with us, that he is punishing us for some past wrong, that he is turning a deaf ear to our prayers.

If there was no *horizontal* forgiveness, then, our hearts and lives would be largely empty. Listen, experiencing the joyful satisfaction of completeness, experiencing the joyful sense of having meaning and purpose comes when you are doing what you were made to do and being what you were made to be, when you are, in short, *fulfilling your calling*. What is part of our calling as Christians? Look at the beginning of v. 21 again. **"To this you were called,"** says Peter. To what were you called? To imitate Jesus! To suffer, not for doing wrong, but for doing good. To bear injustices and hurt feelings, and, perhaps, even hurt bodies, without hurting back, without harboring ill-will, with letting go of our right—maybe a well-deserved right—to get even, as Jesus did—**"When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats."**—to love and forgive enemies *like that* is part of what God has called us to do; it's a purpose for which he, the Potter, has molded us, the clay. And so, as much as we might have a hard time believing it and our natures recoil and scream—No, no, no! Not true! Not true! You're not going to feel good until you lash out, until you vent, until you take your pound of flesh—the truth is we

will not be full and whole and happy on the inside, with ourselves, until we are the imitators of Christ we were called to be. Plus, since the heart and core of the mission Jesus gave us is to proclaim repentance for the forgiveness of sins in his name to all, even to our enemies, if there was no forgiveness in us, rare would be the time when we fulfilled our calling to proclaim the love of Christ to them. More often than not, we wouldn't say a word to our enemies, we would only say bad things about them behind their back. And so, *if there was no forgiveness in your heart, there would be no fullness in your life!*

If there was no horizontal forgiveness, we would, in fact, be worse than empty, we would be miserable and self-destructive, and we would make the people around us, including our own children, miserable, and, perhaps, set them on a course toward self-destruction, as it did in the tragic case of Olivia's family. You see, when the heart is empty of forgiveness, it doesn't stay empty for long; the vacuum is instantly filled with a toxic, corrosive, deadly bitterness and hate, as we saw in Olivia's family.

All of this would be life for us if there was no forgiveness. We know it! We know by experience this horrible 'What if'—What if there was no forgiveness? In those moments of pain and frustration and trouble, especially, the pains, frustrations, and troubles that linger, who of us hasn't struggled with the fear that God is punishing us for some past sin, and maybe, just, maybe, he's finally had it up to here with us.—"Lord, what did I do to deserve this?" or "God, why are you so angry with me?" "Lord, do you still love me? And my goodness we all struggle with bearing up under just punishments and consequences of our actions; we've all painted ourselves as the victims and pointed the finger—"But, Mom...That's not fair! Johnny did worse, and didn't get punished like this." How much more haven't we and don't we struggle with imitating Jesus as Peter calls us to do

here, bearing with unjust suffering and forgiving those who by their words and actions show themselves to be our haters! Before we ever suffer any injustice and wrong, in fact, we've all put our foot down and predetermined what we'd do if—"No way, am I going to let anyone push me around or take advantage of me. Just let someone try, and they'll soon find out what a mistake they have made!" And, when we do suffer injustices and hurts we're the first to cry foul and make threats, "You better take that back, or else..." "Do that again, and I'll..." And we've all tasted our share of toxic, deadly bitterness in our time; we've all drank the poison and waited for the other person to die; we've all wasted our precious hours and days stewing and being angry and unhappy, and making others miserable, as a result.

So, are you just jumping for joy at hearing that amazing, wonderful, oh-so-blessed truth: Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! That means many things but the number one thing it means is this: *there is forgiveness!* There is! There is! There is! Easter means and Easter proclaims that there is real, true, beautiful, complete and absolute forgiveness of all sins, from the greatest to the least, each and every sin down to the very last one! Peter tells us so simply, so succinctly in v. 24 that Jesus himself, all by himself, bore, carried, our sins, all of your sins and all of mine, in his body on the cross. Peter tells us in another section of this letter that Jesus did this "to bring you to God," to reconcile a sinner with a holy God. We could say it this way: Jesus bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that God could answer Jesus' prayer from the cross—Father, forgive them! The resurrection of Jesus on the third day, Easter Sunday, is God the Father telling a world of people that includes us—"I said Yes to my Son's prayer! I forgive you! And so, because of Easter, because Jesus is risen, what Paul said is 100% true—In Jesus we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins! As

Peter affirms here using the prophet Isaiah's words—"by his wounds you have been healed." You are forgiven! Forgiven!

That means you don't have to live one second afraid. You don't need to fear death. You need to fear life even less! Because God raised his Son from the dead and kept his promise in the Gospel to ensure that repentance and forgiveness of sins was preached to your ears, bringing you to faith in his Son, God's mercies are new for you every morning. He is always with you and on your side in all circumstances—the good and the bad. You will not die—never—but live and will proclaim what the LORD has done!

Because there is vertical forgiveness, there is horizontal forgiveness. The love of Christ fills us and compels us, always, to imitate that love. Because the Holy Spirit has, by baptism, covered you in Christ Jesus and made you his holy temple, you can imitate Jesus in every way Peter tells you here. You can bear up under unjust suffering; you can give people the good will and kindness they don't deserve rather than the anger and hate that they may well-deserve. You can be everything you are—a Christian, a little Christ, and, therefore, you can say to others what your big Brother says to you each Sunday through the called servant—I forgive you. You can seize the opportunities that such demonstrations of Christ-like love and forgiveness often create—the opportunities to share the love of the risen Savior.

That means you can live a full life, a life full of satisfaction, meaning, and purpose, as you fulfill your calling. That means you can live free from the misery of bitterness. You can live free to truly love—to seek out the best interest, to serve, and to pray for those who have hurt you and are not your fans. You can put a stop to the cycle of hate and resentment, and create a beautiful future of love and understanding.

Sadly, far too many people live out the unspeakably horrible 'What if,' that would be the case only if Christ had not been raised—***What if there was no forgiveness?*** Rejoice and praise God that that's not you or me. We know and believe the truth: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! And so, we know and believe the truth: There is forgiveness! There is forgiveness, indeed! Knowing that dear, Christian, take the forgiveness that's yours! Believe Jesus—Take heart, your sins are forgiven! Proclaim God's forgiveness in Jesus to all who will give you an ear! Give the forgiveness given you! Tell those who need to hear it—I forgive you! Let your lives and attitudes affirm those words. And, peace be with you! Amen.

SOLI DEO GLORIA

