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8th Message

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FORMED THROUGH FORGIVENESS

SERIES: FORMED INTO CHRIST

Last Monday the leaders of Belgium, Britain, France and Germany gathered to remember the outbreak of World War I, one of the bloodiest wars in history. The next day a moving art installation entitled “Bloodswept Lands and Seas of Red” opened at the Tower of London. By November 11, Armistice Day, 888,246 ceramic poppies will have been “planted” in the moat, one for each British or colonial military fatality. One of those is for my great grandfather. That war, The Great War, the “War to End All Wars” was followed by the “Peace to End All Peace,” a peace treaty that was punitive and vindictive. It aroused resentment in Germany, leading to further enmity and a second world war just twenty years later. After this second war the US took a more enlightened view, helping to rebuild its former enemies. As a result, France and Germany stood together last Monday as former enemies who for over a half-century have been friends.

“Bloodswept lands and seas of red” is a line found in a will written by a soldier on the Western Front. It could be describing the Middle East today. For the past month we have watched the fighting in Gaza, wondering if it will ever be possible for the Israelis and Palestinians to cease their hostilities and forge a lasting peace. Can these enemies become friends? And now we watch with horror the rapid spread of the Islamic State across Syria and Iraq.

Life is a messy business. Relationships are messy whether on the individual, family or international level. We cause offense and we take offense. Friends fall out and become enemies. Family members stop talking with one another. We harbor grievances and resentment. We remember past injustices and we keep those memories alive so as to justify our ongoing resentment. Our memories of our own wrongdoing can lock us in a pit of shame, prisoners to our inability to forgive ourselves. How do we live with one another? How do we live with ourselves? How do we deal with wrongdoing, whether by ourselves to others or by others to us?

As we continue our summer series, “Formed into Christ,” our topic today is “Formed through Forgiveness.” This series is loosely tied to Ephesians, where Paul writes,

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. (Eph 4:32 ESV)

It is easy to read those words, but very difficult to put them into practice. This verse ends a list of instructions spelling out the implications of putting off the old self and putting on the new self:

you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do... that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore... Be kind

to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. (Eph 4:17, 20-24, 32)

I. Forgiven

The call to forgive one another is predicated on God’s forgiveness of us. To be a forgiving people we must be a forgiven people. But ask people what they think about God and the answer is unlikely to be “forgiving.” People tend to have two diametrically opposed views about God. Either we think of him as a harsh judge, always condemning, whom we can never adequately please, and before whom we are never good enough. Or we think of him as an indulgent grandfather, always affirming, and before whom we are basically good. In neither of these views is God seen as a forgiving God. We can’t find forgiveness from a harsh judge. We don’t need forgiveness from an indulgent old man.

It is hard to face up to what we have done. When confronted with our sin we rarely think of God as “forgiving.” All too often we try to avoid him. When God asked Adam about what he had done, he denied responsibility and shifted the blame: “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit of the tree, and I ate” (Gen 3:12). When God asked Cain, “What have you done?” he lamented that his situation was unbearable: “Woe is me!” His statement can be variously translated as “my sin or my guilt or my punishment is beyond bearing or beyond forgiving” (Gen 4:13). He couldn’t live with himself and he certainly couldn’t live with God from whose presence he voluntarily exiled himself. Neither Adam nor Cain thought of God as a forgiving God, and so they both tried to avoid him.

But this is not how God wanted Israel to think of him. He wanted them to know him as a God who forgives sin, a God who can be approached as a forgiver of sin. When Moses asked the Lord to show him his glory, he did so by proclaiming his name, his character:

“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.” (Exod 34:6-7)

He provided Israel with a sacrificial system so that sins could be dealt with. As the various types of sacrifices are described in Leviticus there is a repeated refrain:

And the priest shall make atonement for him for the sin which he has committed, and he shall be forgiven. (Lev 4:35)

The temple was a house of prayer, the conduit to the open ear, eye and heart of God, as Solomon understood in his prayer of dedication:

“And listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.” (1 Kgs 8:30)

God forgives sin. He delights to forgive sin. It is in his character. He does so according to his loyal love. It is a sign of his strength, not of his weakness. He is always ready to hear the prayer of the sinner seeking forgiveness. Sadly, Israel rarely availed itself of this forgiveness. Jonah found it offensive because God was willing to forgive even foreigners, even the enemy in Nineveh. But Micah knew that this was Israel's only hope: "Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression?" (Mic 7:18).

Both the sacrificial system and the temple pointed forward to Christ. It is through Christ that we pray to God and he forgives. It is in Christ as both the high priest and the sacrifice that atonement is made for us for the sin which we have committed and we are forgiven. How does this forgiveness work? In our Scripture reading (2 Cor 5:14-21), we heard,

in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them. (2 Cor 5:19)

We have sinned. The Bible uses multiple words for sin: sin, iniquity, transgression, as well as numerous individual types of sin, and it is not afraid to use these words. In our heart of hearts we all know we sin. Sin is serious. Furthermore, sin is inexcusable, though this doesn't prevent us making excuses. As C. S. Lewis wrote,

I find that when I am asking God to forgive me I am often in reality (unless I watch myself very carefully) asking Him to do something quite different. I am asking Him not to forgive me but to excuse me. But there is all the difference in the world between forgiving and excusing... If one was not really to blame then there is nothing to forgive. In that sense forgiveness and excusing are almost opposites... we shall go away imagining that we have repented and been forgiven when all that has really happened is that we have satisfied ourselves with our own excuses. They may be very bad excuses; we are all too easily satisfied about ourselves... All the real excusing He will do. What we have got to take to Him is the inexcusable bit, the sin.¹

God rightly accuses us of sin, but when he forgives us he no longer counts our sin against us. In Romans 4 Paul uses this verb "count" or "reckon" eleven times to describe how this works. He quotes two Old Testament texts: "blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin" (Rom 4:8; Ps 32:2), and "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness" (Rom 4:3; Gen 15:6). God no longer counts our sin against us; instead, he counts our faith to us as righteousness. When we receive forgiveness we accept both the charge against us—guilty of sin—and the removal of the charge and its penalty. We accept the charge in confession. We accept the removal of the charge and penalty by faith in Christ. God doesn't take the sin lightly; he condemns it. But in Christ he takes the penalty of the sin on himself. He places us "in Christ" and reckons us as "in Christ," in whom we have died to the old self and risen to the new self. In this way of reckoning, God condemns the sin but not the sinner. He separates the sin from the sinner, casting "all our sins into the depths of the sea" (Mic 7:19), removing them from us "as far as the east is from the west" (Ps 103:12). He remembers our sin no more. How is it possible for God to do this? Surely he remembers everything. The Biblical word "remember" implies not simply mental recall but action based upon that. When God looks upon his forgiven people, whom he has separated from their sins, those sins which we formerly committed do not enter at all into how God sees us and treats us.

It is hard to receive forgiveness from God. We place many obstacles in the way. In confession we have to accept that we really sinned. We have to stop making excuses. In faith we have to accept that God

reckons to us not our sin but Christ's death and resurrection. We have to accept that God really has separated us from our sin. It is a free gift. We can't earn it. We can't make ourselves good enough to deserve it. We can't pay for it, with money, or good deeds, or penance. It is a free gift of grace. And if God has forgiven us, we have to forgive ourselves. Inability to forgive ourselves is a sign of pride or of false humility or of lack of faith in the sufficiency of Christ. We have to accept that God really does love us and is for us, even at great cost to himself. In his great love, he forgives.

When God forgives us he reckons us as being "in Christ." And "if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation" (2 Cor 5:17). This is the beginning of our formation into Christ. God begins to mend us by forgiving us: "as God in Christ forgave you."

2. Forgiving

As God in Christ has forgiven us, so we are to forgive one another. We pray as such in the Lord's Prayer: "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Being ourselves forgiven and forgiving others are tied together. In Matthew's account of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus immediately adds a stern warning:

"For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Matt 6:14-15)

It is hard, very hard, to extend forgiveness when we are wronged. Our natural response, the response of the old self, is to want revenge or justice. Revenge wants to lash out at the one who has wronged us. This was Lamech's attitude, when he boasted:

**"I have killed a man for wounding me,
a young man for striking me.
If Cain's revenge is sevenfold,
then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold." (Gen 4:23-24)**

Revenge escalates evil. Sadly there is plenty of revenge in the world today.

The demand for justice is for retribution: make the offender pay commensurate with the offense. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" is retributive justice. But this results in twice as many people being blind and toothless. Such justice does control the spread of evil, but it does nothing to de-escalate it. Neither revenge nor justice separate the sin from the sinner. Both leave the sin and the sinner bound together, condemning both. Both leave the wrongdoing in place.

The alternative to revenge or justice is forgiveness, which overcomes evil with good by separating the sin from the sinner. It takes both the sin and the sinner seriously. The sin is named as sin, but the sinner is set free; the sin is no longer reckoned against him.

This New Testament call to forgiveness is not addressed to the state. Elsewhere Paul shows that the authorities must exercise justice to restrain evil (Rom 13). This call to forgiveness is to addressed to Christians, to us. "Forgive one another" means forgive your fellow Christians. But throughout church history this has been extended to how we treat non-Christians as well.

Why do we forgive? We forgive because Christ forgave. On the cross he said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). When the man crucified beside him said, "Remember me," Jesus separated him from his sin (Luke 23:42-43).

We forgive because forgiveness is an expression of love. When Simon the Pharisee grumbled that Jesus allowed a sinful woman to wash and anoint his feet, Jesus rebuked him, “her many sins have been forgiven; that’s why she loved much. But the one who is forgiven little, loves little” (Luke 7:47 HCSB).

We forgive because forgiveness is a gift of grace. In the call, “forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you,” the verb “forgive” is rooted in the word “grace.” We grace one another as God has graced us. Forgiveness is a gift of grace which lubricates relationships within the Christian community of grace.

We forgive because forgiveness sets the captive free. The captive may be the victim, captive to his desire for revenge or demand for justice. The recent movie *The Railway Man* tells the story of Eric Lomax, a young Scottish officer taken captive in the Fall of Singapore in 1942 and forced by the Japanese to work on the Death Railway, where he was brutally treated. For decades after the war he was consumed with a desire for justice, focused on the translator who was present at his interrogation and torture sessions. Throughout these years Eric was a prisoner to his own anger. Finally he heeded his wife’s plea that he get counseling. Eventually he was reconciled with the translator, and they met in Thailand at the site of his abuse. Forgiveness sets the one offended free from anger, bitterness, resentment, victim mentality, all the things that hold him captive. Forgiveness also sets the offender free, separating him from his sin.

We forgive because forgiveness overcomes evil with good, whether it is our Christian brother or sister whom we forgive or our enemy.

How often should we forgive? This question must have bothered Peter for he asked Jesus, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Peter no doubt thought he was being generous in being willing to forgive so often. Not so, said Jesus; “but seventy times seven” (Matt 18:21-22). This didn’t mean that on the 491st time Peter didn’t have to forgive. No, on the 491st time Peter still had to forgive. Jesus meant that Peter had to forgive infinitely, without measure. It was in this context that Jesus then told the parable of the unforgiving servant.

We are called to be a forgiving people. We need to be a people who are formed through forgiveness into the likeness of Christ. Unfortunately this is not at all how the church in general and Christians individually are viewed. Ask people what they think about Christians, and the answer is unlikely to be “forgiving.” Just as both Christians and non-Christians need to see a forgiving God, so both need to see a forgiving Church.

3. Ministry of Reconciliation

Not only are we forgiven and forgiving, but we also urge others to find forgiveness, both to receive it and to give it. Paul writes that having reconciled us to himself through Christ, God

gave us the ministry of reconciliation, ...entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God himself making his appeal through us. (2 Cor 5:18-20)

And what is this ministry, this message, this appeal that we make? “Be reconciled to God.” We urge others to know God. Not to know him as a severe judge, always condemning, before whom we are never good enough. Nor to know him as an indulgent grandparent, always affirming, before whom we are basically good. But to know him as a forgiving God, who calls sin sin, bears the injury himself,

and separates the sin from the sinner. Instead of reckoning our sin against us, he will reckon our faith in Christ to us as righteousness. This is the gospel. It is scandalous: no sin is unforgivable; no sinner is unforgivable. It is unjust, if measured by retributive justice. But it is liberating, restorative, free and true.

Many Christians through the years have seen this ministry of reconciliation as extending beyond just proclaiming the gospel of sins forgiven, of urging reconciliation between sinners and God, extending it to seeking to bring reconciliation between people at enmity, whether on an individual level or a national level, and whether those at enmity are Christians or not.

One organization seeking to reconcile Christians is Peacemaker Ministries, whose theme verse is the beatitude, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (Matt 5:9). Among its various programs is The Institute for Christian Conciliation. It is sad that such an organization needs to exist: Christians shouldn’t need reconciliation. But the fact that we have this command in Scripture, “forgive one another,” and others like it, as well as our own experience, shows that Christians do indeed need help reconciling with one another.

On the international level, one of the best known recent examples of a reconciliation ministry is Desmond Tutu, who headed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that prevented retribution after the end of apartheid rule in South Africa. The Commission followed three simple steps: confession, forgiveness, reconciliation. Instead of revenge or retributive justice it sought restorative justice. Archbishop Tutu’s most recent book is called simply *The Book of Forgiveness*.

Two months ago I visited Dachau. In this museum site dedicated to preserving the memory of the horrors of the Nazi murder of Jews and other unwanted peoples, what most moved me was the Protestant Church of Reconciliation. Here in this site dedicated to preserving the memory of great wrongdoing was a church dedicated to moving beyond that wrongdoing, to achieving forgiveness and reconciliation. Inside the church is a Coventry Cross of Nails and the Coventry Litany of Reconciliation.

In November 1940 the English city of Coventry was heavily bombed by German aircraft. Among the many buildings destroyed was the 14th century cathedral of St Michael, reduced to a burnt-out shell. As the staff toured the ruins the next day, the Provost, Richard Howard, grabbed a charred timber and scrawled on the ruined wall “Father Forgive.” Not “Father Forgive Them” but simply “Father Forgive,” for we all need the Father’s forgiveness. He pledged himself not to seek revenge but instead to work toward forgiveness and reconciliation. Out of this was born the International Centre for Reconciliation. Its symbol is the Cross of Nails. Three large medieval nails from the roof timbers were retrieved from the ruins and fashioned into a cross, the Coventry Cross of Nails. Similar crosses have been sent to various sites around the world, beginning with Dresden and including Dachau.

Each day at the new Coventry Cathedral the Coventry Litany of Reconciliation is recited, confessing the sins of the world and beseeching the Father’s forgiveness. The list of seven sins is loosely based on the Seven Deadly Sins: pride, greed, envy, anger, lust, gluttony, sloth. I would like us to recite the Litany together:

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. (Rom 3:23)

The hatred which divides nation from nation, race from race, class
from class,
Father Forgive.

The covetous desires of people and nations to possess what is not
their own,
Father Forgive.

The greed which exploits the work of human hands and lays waste
the earth,
Father Forgive.

Our envy of the welfare and happiness of others,
Father Forgive.

Our indifference to the plight of the imprisoned, the homeless,
the refugee,
Father Forgive.

The lust which dishonors the bodies of men, women and chil-
dren,
Father Forgive.

The pride which leads us to trust in ourselves and not in God,
Father Forgive.

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as
God in Christ forgave you. (Eph 4:32)

The World War I commemorations last Monday were both solemn and hopeful: solemn in memory of the many millions killed in what was a rather senseless war, but hopeful as former enemies stood together. But in the Middle East, still suffering the ramifications of that war, things do not look hopeful. After a few short cease-fires, hostilities have resumed in Gaza. The Israel-Palestinian conflict has dragged on for decades, and peace seems further away than ever. But in the midst of the conflict are Christians pursuing reconciliation: people such as Salim Munayer, founder of Musalaha, an Arabic word meaning “reconciliation”; or Sami Awad of Holy Land Trust, whose father and uncle founded Bethlehem Bible College; or Daoud Nasser of Tent of Nations, whose motto is “We refuse to be enemies.” Salim, Sami and Daoud are Palestinian Christians, yet much of the world is unaware that there are Christians in the Middle East.

This lack of awareness is changing. Over the past few weeks an unusual symbol has proliferated on social media: the Arabic letter “n” (ن *noon*). It is the first letter of *Nasrani*, the Arabic word for Christian, derived from Nazarene, as in Jesus the Nazarene, Jesus of Nazareth. Fighters of the Islamic State have daubed this letter on the homes of Christians throughout the territory they have overrun. Christians around the world have been adopting this letter as their online avatar to express solidarity with Middle Eastern Christians, whom until a few weeks ago they didn’t know exist.

One of the less-remarked tragedies of the last decade has been the rapid acceleration in the loss of Christians from the Middle East. The Middle East needs its Christians; it has had them for 2000 years. The Christians are the peacemakers, the ones in between. Christians are the ones with the good news of forgiveness and reconciliation.

We are to be a people shaped by forgiveness. We have a forgiving God. At the heart of the gospel is the scandal of the forgiveness of sins. May we be known as a people of forgiveness who proclaim a God of forgiveness. Let us close with the Lord’s Prayer:

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us,
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.

1. C. S. Lewis, “On Forgiveness” (1947), in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* [1949] (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 178-180.

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