

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
The Voice-Our Choice: Will You Accept Forgiveness?

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Genesis 6:11-22, Mark 2:1-12

It was the late 1800's and the city of Delhi was overrun with Cobras. The British Authorities made the decision that something had to be done. Their solution was to set up a bounty system on dead Cobras. When people turned them in they would receive a reward. This worked well for a while until people realized that they could breed Cobras and make more money. So that is exactly what they did. When the government discovered this, they ended the program, at which time the people breeding the snakes simply let them loose and there were more Cobras then, than before. It became known as the cobra effect and was one of the proofs for the Law of Unintended Consequences. And for those of you not familiar with this law, it is not quite Murphy's Law, where if something can go wrong it will, but instead it proposes that for any action or decision there are consequences, good or ill, that we can never foresee. Why this matters to us this morning is that because of the law of unexpected consequences, what mattered most to Jesus matters very little to most of us, and that is sin and forgiveness. And this ought to matter to us because by not taking sin and forgiveness as seriously as Jesus did, neither we nor the world are what God has created them to be.

In order to understand this however we need to once again hop into our church time machine and take a trip back to medieval Europe, where there was only one church, the Roman Church. Within the life and workings of the Roman church at that time the concepts of sin and forgiveness played powerful roles. They did so because the salvation of every believer hung in the balance on a daily basis based on sin and forgiveness. In fact, think of a set of scales. On one side of the scale is sin and on the other is forgiveness; forgiveness which is earned through participating in the sacraments; by doing works of merit. At the end of someone's life how the scale was weighted determined one's eternal destiny; heaven, purgatory or hell. Needless to say this would make people pay attention to sin and forgiveness.

In the early to mid 1500s suddenly there was more than one church. There were many and they were called the Protestant churches. These churches viewed salvation in a very different manner. Taking the scale metaphor with sin on one side and forgiveness on the other, what we have was that God, in and through Jesus, placed God's thumb on the scale of forgiveness so that it was always more heavily weighted and one's salvation was no longer in doubt. For Presbyterians God simply chose whose scales to tip and for others, all one had to do was profess faith in Jesus and the scales were permanently moved. Either way there was no longer the daily fear of hell. So, where is the unintended consequence? The unintended consequence was that sin and forgiveness were no longer as important as they once were. They were not because Christians no longer had to fear eternal punishment. Christians could pretty much do as they pleased and God would take care of them.

This view then, especially within the 20<sup>th</sup> century even led to the image of God being transformed. God was no longer the stern, angry father, but was now instead the loving grandparent who gave all of us grandkids salvation trophies for just showing up. Many of you may be asking, "OK John, why is this bad? Why ought we to once again be concerned about the ideas of sin and

forgiveness when in fact we are saved by grace through faith?” My response would once again be, that we ought to be concerned about sin and forgiveness because only by so doing can we and the world be made better.

In order to understand this we need to understand the nature of sin. Often when we speak of sin, we are actually speaking of sins...individual acts such as those we see on the nightly news or read about on-line. But you see sin itself is the disease that causes those symptoms. And sin is a disease of the heart that infects individuals and societies. What sin does is it constricts the heart and so the heart rather than being able to reach outward in love, can only constrict inward in fear. Sin causes us to be afraid of people who are different from us, who might have more than us, who see the world differently from us. We become afraid of losing what is ours. We become afraid that we will not have enough. The results of this fear are all of the symptoms we see every day; racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, hatred and violence. These all come out of a fearful restricted heart. This is why I believe that Jesus moves first to dealing with sin and then to healing; because all the physical healing in the world while wonderful, will never liberate someone to be fully who God intends them to be. It will never liberate the world to be what God designed it to be. Only healing a constricted, fearful heart will do that. In a profound sense this is why Jesus came. He came to deal with sin and its power in our lives.

This is where the second half of our sin-forgiveness equation comes in, when we see forgiveness for what it is, a transformational act of God. What this means is that forgiveness is, as D. M. Baily writes in his book God Was in Christ, not merely a good natured indulgence. It is not a simple, “Oh, don’t worry about it. What you did was not nice, but I love you, so go on out and play. It’s all right.” Forgiveness is instead what happens when we bare all that we are and all that we have done to God and God’s response is that of forgiveness; when God tells us that God will not leave us or desert us, but will continue to be at work within us, making us new people. In that moment fear loses and love wins. In that moment our hearts begin to be open to loving God and neighbor. In that moment we are changed; but only when we are willing to receive it; only when we are willing to risk everything in order that God’s forgiveness becomes real in our lives.

His life could be the basis of Dickens novel or a made for TV movie. At age seven his mother dies and he is sent to a boarding school. After two years he is sent to live with his stepmother. Then at age eleven he goes to sea with his father and sails the Mediterranean. After his father retires he continues sailing on merchant ships until he is kidnapped by the British Royal Navy and pressed into service aboard a Navy ship. Hating the navy he tries to desert where upon he is given 84 lashes. He finally is freed from his service and begins working with slavers. Not getting along with the crew he is dropped in Africa where he becomes a slave to an African queen. He is saved by friends of his father who bring him back to England where once again he embarks on sailing on slave ships. One night, in the midst of a great storm that should have sunk the ship he was on, John Newton prays to God, is saved and has a religious conversion. He soon becomes an evangelical Christian. Now at this point in his story, most of us who know John Newton as the writer of Amazing grace, believe that he begins to work for the abolition of slavery in England. But that is not the case. Though he has some sympathy for the slaves he either actively or passively works in the slave trade for 34 more years. And it is only then, that he comes to see the sin of slavery, confesses his part in it and works to eliminate it. In other

words, he was a Christian, saved by grace, yet who was blind to the sin of human bondage. But in forgiveness he was able to help change the world.

You and I live in a world in which in many ways has come very far from the one in which Newton lived. Slavery is outlawed. We have laws protecting the rights of minorities and women. This is a better world. Yet at the same time we have not come that far at all. Human trafficking, domestic abuse, terrorism, continuing racism; all of these things still keep us and the world from being the creatures and the creation God desires. The question for us this morning is are we willing to do the difficult work of looking for the sin within and then receiving the forgiveness that will change us and through us the world. My challenge to you then this morning is for us to ask ourselves, am I willing to take sin seriously and then receive that forgiveness that will make me a new and better human being?