

Spring Lake Presbyterian Church
Pastor: Rev. Kathryn M. Treadway
February 10, 2008

Romans 5:12-21

Psalm 32

¹*Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.*

²*Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

³*While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.*

⁴*For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah*

⁵*Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah*

⁶*Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.*

⁷*You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. Selah*

⁸*I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.*

⁹*Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you.*

¹⁰*Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.*

¹¹*Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.*

Take Now My Life

My Lutheran friends love to share with me their favorite quote from Martin Luther. In two words, "Sin Boldly!" While the Presbyterians are suffering guiltily for their sins, the Lutherans are joyfully proclaiming that we must sin boldly! But Luther, being the reformer that he was, did not complete his advice to the world with those two transformative words, "Sin Boldly!". Rather, he used them in the following context. In a letter to his colleague, Phillip Melancthon, he wrote, **"God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners. Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong, but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world."**

Why would the great reformer, Martin Luther, proclaim the need to sin boldly? To stress that the grace of God in Christ is so much bolder, so much stronger than whatever we have done. To stress that we must have trust in Christ that is stronger than our own sins. And to accomplish that kind of trust, we must discipline ourselves to recognize our sins, and to Confess Boldly to the one in whom we trust, the one who Forgives Boldly.

I also appreciate Luther's statement that "God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners." A few years ago, an older man came to me after the worship service and told me that he really liked the prayers of confession, but he had yet to pray one that spoke of his own sins. I don't know if he was trying to persuade me to believe that he was without sin or not, but I was troubled by the fact that this man may have been what Luther called an "imaginary" sinner. The truth is that we are ALL sinners. And while we may not like to think of ourselves in such a light, we have all fallen short of the perfect love that has been blanketed overtop us. We humans do not measure up.

The passage from Romans reminds us that our sin originated from one man's sin – from Adam's sin or, for those who wish to be inclusive here, from Adam AND Eve's sin (after all, we women were tempted too). And with sin, came death. Adam and Eve were not some evil people who would have made the headlines for obnoxious behavior or dangerous activity. They didn't openly carry a concealed weapon without a license and walk into a bank or take their neighbor to court because they were in need of money. They didn't murder their best friend's husband or stalk a woman with nice legs. Adam and Eve were known to walk with God. They

were the type of people that you and I would call “Christian” except at that time there was no Christianity and no Christ. Adam and Eve were the ones who worshiped God daily for God was their best friend. They walked together in the garden and talked together. They had a relationship with their creator to such an extent that God allowed them to name the animals. God provided for their needs, providing human love and food. And then, in the midst of perfection, they gave into temptation.

We who are Christians like to believe that we are without sin, that WE won’t be tempted, that WE won’t do those things, but we who are Christian are also we who are human. We expect better of our brothers and sisters in Christ, but because our expectations are so high, we hurt even more when Christians DO sin. And here is where that good news that Luther proclaimed seems to make the biggest impact: “God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners.” No, God saves REAL sinners, like Christians, like you and yes, even me. Sinning BOLDLY is simply recognizing our actions as sinful when we do them. For only when we recognize them can we confess them and be freed from them.

And here is where we approach Psalm 32. The Psalm begins, ¹*Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.* ²*Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.* We ARE happy when we are not sinning, because where there is sin there is also shame. “Oh, but Katie, we know there are people who feel NO shame for what they do!” And I’d agree that there are those as well, and I would also agree that frequently WE ARE THOSE PEOPLE. We ALL get tied up in sin without shame. Whether our sin is openly verbally hurting someone else to appease our own pain or if it is failing to share what God has provided for us with another or if it is convincing ourselves that we were right and they were wrong, we all participate in sins without shame. We participate so shamelessly that we are not only trying to hide such sins from ourselves but we also hide our sins from God. In convincing ourselves that we are actually in the right, we fail to consider that everything we do or say or think AS WELL AS everything we don’t do, we don’t say, and we don’t think can effect another human being. Taking responsibility for our actions means recognizing that our actions are sinful and desiring forgiveness. We should WANT to inherit the happiness, the blessedness that God offers. And I think, deep in the core of each of us, we DO want to untie the knot of sin that has wound its way around us.

The Psalmist writes, ³*While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.* ⁴*For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.* ⁵*Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,” and you forgave the guilt of my sin.* Interesting choice of words here, “you forgave the guilt of my sin.” When we are forgiven by God, that is, when we receive the forgiveness that God wants to BOLDLY give us, not only our sins but also our GUILT is washed away.

⁶*Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.* ⁷*You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.* ⁸*I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.*

God is the one leading us through life. God is the one helping us make the decisions that are best in our lives. God does not leave us.

⁹*Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you.* ¹⁰*Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.* ¹¹*Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.* Don’t be asinine in your stubbornness to admit that you need God to reign over you! Look deep inside, for there you will find that you desire God’s love, you desire your Creator to think that you are an amazing creation. For when you allow God’s love to overcome you, the tears may fall, but they are tears of joy that cry out “please! Please take the reigns and give me the understanding to change my ways and to receive your forgiveness!” And we cry this cry not because we want some far off promise of heaven, but because deep within we know that

compared to God we are not even a speck of dust on the radar screen. Yet we also know that for some reason God loves and cares for the speck of dust that we are, and God breathes life into us, and hope and joy.

Weekly we sing the words “Take now my life.” Coming to terms with our own sinfulness is the first step in allowing God to take our lives. To be perfectly honest with you, God already has your life. Remember in our baptisms we announce to the world that we are children of God? And that long before we were baptized, before we were even born God held us and cared for us and guided us? So why do we even need to ask God to take our lives? Because we need to consciously let go of the fact that we are trying to take control of our own lives, of our own futures. Trusting in God means being willing to let God do whatever God needs to do with our lives. Trusting in God means letting go.

I end with the story of Cliff Hanger (clarify not “a” cliff hanger but a man named Cliff Hanger). When my girls were pre-readers, we frequently watched the PBS kids show “Between the Lions.” The show taught basic phonics and reading skills in a simple way kids could understand while adults enjoyed the double entendres that added comic relief to a 30 minute how-to-read program. One of those comic relief skits was about a man named Cliff Hanger. The music begins, “Cliff Hanger, hanging from a cliff . . . dum dum duuuuuuuuuuu!” At which time Cliff (muscles bulging, obviously having held on awhile) says his famous words “Can’t . . . hold . . . on . . . much . . . longer!” Suddenly a plane would fly by with words written across telling Cliff exactly what he needed in order to be saved. He would read them and follow the instructions and then, trusting all he could, he would let go of the branch hanging from the cliff.” Some snafu would occur while he was in mid-air and he would end up hanging on to the same branch he had been holding onto at the beginning of the episode and a little voice would croak “and that’s why he’s called Cliff Hanger.”

When we ask God to take our lives, God wants us to let go of the branch, to let go of those places where it appears we maintain control of our own lives. We must be willing to let go, to let GOD take control of our lives, to let GOD guide us and provide for us. We must give God ALL of ourselves, those places where we HAVE sinned boldly and those other places where we have convinced ourselves that we are without sin. We must let go of the branch. And so the season of Lent begins . . . Take now my life.