May 31, 2015

Psalm 103:1-18

How do you love yourself?

Rev. Kerry Smith

Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Psalm 103:1-18 New Revised Standard Version

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s. The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust. As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.

Today we talk about forgiveness. Ernest Hemingway wrote a story about a father and son who had a serious misunderstanding. In the story, the boy finally runs away from home. The father is not content to let his son go and in an effort to find the boy, the father puts an ad in the Madrid, Spain newspaper. It said, “Dear Paco, Meet me at the town square at noon on Sunday. All is forgiven...Your Father.” That Sunday 800 men by the name of Paco showed up at the town square. They all came seeking forgiveness from their fathers.[[1]](#footnote-2) We all want to receive forgiveness; we all want to be forgiven.

When we started this sermon series on “How to Love Yourself,” I shared with you Jesus’s words in Matthew 22: this is the greatest commandment, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. And a second is like it, to love your neighbor as yourself. We asked the question, how do you love yourself? We talked about seeing ourselves as God sees us, and loving ourselves as God loves us. Because if we can open ourselves up to God’s love, we will experience a peace that will transform not only how we see ourselves, but how we see the world around us. God knows us, God made us, and God loves us, just the way we are.

Last week we talked about our strengths and our weaknesses. We heard the Apostle Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” We all have weaknesses. So often we would like to wish away our weakness, but if we would it also unintentionally washes away our strengths. I remember when I was first a youth minister and talking with a 6th grader who was upset. She talked about how her parents had divorced when she was young and how hard it was to have stepparents. I was able to share with her that my parents were divorced too, and that I not only had stepparents but I had ex-stepparents. God was able to use my life to let this particular youth know that she was not alone.

Today we are talking about forgiveness. If we are going to love ourselves, we have to forgive ourselves, and to do that we have to accept God’s forgiveness. The Psalm we sang together says the Lord forgives all our iniquity, all of our sins, all of our wrong choices, all of our bad behavior, all of the times that we hurt others and hurt ourselves. God does not repay us according to our sins. God is not in the tit for tat business. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is God’s steadfast love toward the faithful. As far as the east is from the west, so far does God remove our transgressions from us.

God has forgiven us and God will continue to forgive us, now we must forgive ourselves. In the book “Forgive and Forget,” Lewis Smedes writes, “The more decent we are the more acutely we feel our pain for the unfair hurts we caused. Our pain becomes our hate. The pain we cause other people becomes the hate we feel for ourselves for having done them wrong. We judge, we convict, and we sentence ourselves. Mostly we do this in secret. To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

This has been a hard topic to talk about. I have done things in my life that I struggle with daily. I know in my head that God has forgiven me, and I have tried to forgive myself, and sometimes I feel like I am successful and other days the guilt weighs me down. For me, when that happens, when I am overwhelmed with the times I have fallen short of what God wants for me, when I am wracked with guilt, I have to continually forgive myself. It is like a mantra that I have to say to myself, “God has forgiven me, I am a new creation in Christ, God has forgiven me, I am a new creation in Christ.”

The hard truth is that I am going to continue to make mistakes. I am a human being who is sinful. And I have to ask God to give me the courage to face my failures, to help me embrace my imperfection. And I am so thankful for God’s grace that allows me to receive God’s forgiveness and invites me to forgive myself. Forgiving myself is a daily activity because I ache when I think about my failures as a daughter, a mother, a wife, a friend, a pastor, a child of God.

Christian author Frederick Buechner wrote, “When somebody you have wronged forgives you, you are spared the dull and self- diminishing throb of a guilty conscience. When you forgive someone who has wronged you, you are spared the dismal corrosion of bitterness and wounded pride for both parties. Forgiveness means the freedom again to be at peace inside your own skin and to be glad in each other's presence.[[3]](#footnote-4) And it is our own forgiveness that we have received from God that enables us to forgive others and forgive ourselves.

My mom told me a story about my 95 year old great aunt. When my great aunt was a little girl, she did not get to go on the family vacation. She was the eldest of the younger children. Cars were not big SUVs then and the whole family would not fit. Since she was the oldest girl, she had to stay home and cook and clean for the older brothers who were running the farm in the absence of their parents. The younger sisters went on vacation because they were younger. My great aunt tells this story with such anger because she is still upset that she missed the vacation. For about 85 years she has carried that anger and venom around with her. What a burden! It is over, it is gone, she missed the vacation, let it go! But instead she carries this resentment with her to this day. Does this remind you of anyone? Maybe yourself?

“When we choice to hold onto anger, when we refuse to forgive and forget, we cut ourselves off from our relationship with God. When we choose to hold onto guilt, or feelings of unworthiness, or resentments of any kind, we are denying God’s grace into our lives and refusing to allow grace to transform us into the people God has called us to be – sinners all, every one of us, but forgiven sinners through the amazing and wonderful grace of God in Jesus Christ.”[[4]](#footnote-5) May we believe and embrace God’s forgiveness of us because that forgiveness can transform us and open our hearts.

1. Sermon illustration found here: <http://www.hollywoodumc.org/Upload/Sermons/SermonPDF01-02-11.pdf> Ernest Hemingway, “The Capital of the World,” The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987, p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Sermon illustration found here: http://www.vanfumc.org/service/text/2008-11-16.pdf Smedes, Lewis. “Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don’t Deserve,” HarperCollins, San Francisco, CA, 1984. P72. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Sermon illustration found here: <http://www.hollywoodumc.org/Upload/Sermons/SermonPDF01-02-11.pdf> Frederick Buechner, Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABCs of Faith, New York: HarperCollins, 2004, p. 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Said by Rev. Kathy Cooper-Ledesma here: http://www.hollywoodumc.org/Upload/Sermons/SermonPDF01-02-11.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-5)