Can I Forgive Me?

March 14-15, 2015

 My, my, you came ready to worship today! And I am glad to be here with you. I love the weekends because I get to come here and worship God with you.

 For the past few weeks, Pastor Suzanne has been exploring this wonderful prayer we know as the Lord’s Prayer. Each week she has been choosing an element of that prayer and illuminating it so that we might gain a deeper understanding of what God expects of us. This week, we look at forgiveness. Now, not long ago, Pastor Suzanne offered a wonderful message about forgiveness. There is little I might add to what she said, it was so well done.

 But as the two of us discussed forgiveness, she suggested I approach it from a unique perspective, a perspective we don’t often address. The Lord’s Prayer reads, “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” We ask God to forgive us for what we do wrong and we in turn are to forgive others when they wrong us. But what happens when we are so convicted by our actions, when we are so convinced of the horrific nature of what we have seen or done, that we can’t imagine that we are forgivable? What happens when we are feel so completely guilty that our hope disintegrates, our faith disappears, and we are left with no place to turn? What happens when we can’t forgive ourselves?

 Let’s begin with a prayer.

 *God of hope, God of love, God of life, God of the future, God of eternity, help me see the reality of what you hold in store for me. Lift my head from the path so I can see the beauty of your skies, your sun and stars. Help me to trust you so completely that I can risk remembering the awful parts of my past and still forgive myself for what I have done, knowing that you, as well as you know me, choose to forgive me. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.*

 So, take out your message notes. They are inserted in your worship folder. This may be your first time in awhile with message notes. The notes give you an outline of my message, so you can follow along. There are fill-in spaces where you can insert anything you feel is appropriate. I will also give you some suggestions about what might go in those spaces. You are free to use these notes or disregard them. And if you complete your notes, please feel free to take them home and use them for future reference, if you think they might be helpful in some way. It is my hope that these notes might keep you awake through the entire message today.

 He was a news photographer. His name was Kevin Carter. One of his photographs had just won the Pulitzer Prize. It’s up on the screen. It’s a little girl of the Sudan. She is dying because of the famine and is in the midst of hundreds of thousands of people who were starving and homeless, diseased and suffering. She was stumbling on spindly legs and had just taken a few wobbly steps and then collapsed in the middle of the road. Just behind her, in the background, is a vulture, waiting.

 Carter had taken this picture, had tried to shoo away the vulture, and then sat down beneath a nearby tree, lit a cigarette and had begun to cry.

 Scott Simon was reporting the story. He said that it was odd that Carter should do things in that order: shoot the picture, shoo the vulture, then cry. And he was reminded that not long ago he had received an email from Carter, a note along with a photo. This photo showed Simon kneeling beside a beheaded corpse taking notes, jotting impressions. Carter’s note asked if Simon remembered it.

 In a later phone call to Carter, he said that he did remember it, but it was only about once a year now, that the memory came back. Carter told him that the memories of his photos came back with about the same frequency, too, about once a year, but he had enough of them that he could have a fresh nightmare every night.

 The reason Scott Simon was reporting this story was because Kevin Carter had killed himself that day. “Sometimes,” Simon concluded, “there are vultures that simply won’t be shooed away.”

 Paul agrees. In this text we read a few minutes ago, Paul is very specific about the vultures. He says that if we don’t believe in the resurrection of the body, then how can we believe in the resurrection of Christ? **If we don’t accept the resurrection of Christ, then the Gospel we proclaim is worthless and so is our faith.** For if we don’t believe that Christ rose from the dead, all we are left with is vultures.

 The resurrection of Christ is the formative act which binds and defines the Christian faith. On it rests the whole Gospel, the entire Christian faith, the understanding of hope which infuses our being and energizes our lives. There is nothing so central to the Christian faith as this belief in resurrection. **And out of resurrection springs hope, the hope that the future will be better than the present.** The hope that the end of life will not just bring a mean and cold burden of topsoil, but a reward, a future of equality, of joy, of peace, of love. The resurrection gives us courage to go on, to endure, to persevere, even when the going is miserable, because we know that there is a prize ahead, a reward for which we strive. We lean forward, Paul says, always striving, always reaching for the hope.

 But the vultures are always with us. They have been around for a long time. In the seventeenth century, Thomas Hobbes, the philosopher and economist, described human life as “…solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short.”

 In the twenties and thirties, Freiderich Nietzsche looked at Christianity and decided it was a joke. “What are all these empty churches but the tomb of a dead God?”

 Bertrand Russell, a contemporary philosopher wrote: “All the labor of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system… the whole temple of [human] achievement must invariably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built.” The vultures are still with us.

 Not long ago, the *Columbus Dispatch* carried the headline, “U.S. Lacks Moral Consensus.” They reported on a survey. “Americans are making up their own rules and laws… [they] choose which laws of God to believe. There is absolutely no moral consensus in this country.” The article went on to say that Americans believe their political, religious, and business leaders have failed them. “Worse yet is the press… As a moral authority in their lives, Americans rate the press below fictional TV characters.” Religion, the report goes on to say, plays almost no role in shaping most lives.

 The vultures are insidious, you see. They shred our lives bit by bit. Inch by inch they pull and tear away at our very moral fabric. We endure it in the nightmares that chase us in our sleep. We hear it in the anger and the cynicism of those around us. We see it in the destructive, reckless, viciousness of political campaigns. We hear it in the malicious derision that passes for entertainment and journalism these days. Our government leaders label and denigrate those who disagree with them. The women and men of the United Methodist Church can no longer discuss theology and inclusiveness in the church without being labeled, castigated, and berated.

 And when the vultures get a little too close, we look for hope, we seek life. Some of you will remember MASH, the TV show about a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital unit in the Korean War. And if you do, you’ll remember Sidney Friedman, the psychiatrist who was called in periodically to treat personnel suffering from mental stress stemming from the horrors they saw daily. One day, Sidney showed up at the camp and asks two doctors, the stars of the show, Hawkeye and BJ, if he can bunk in with them for awhile. One night stretches to several, then a week, then two, then three, and Sidney is still there. Finally, Hawkeye asks him, “Sidney, it’s not that we want you to leave, but what are you doing here? You’ve been here for three weeks and you show no signs of leaving.”

 Sidney says, “You give life here, and I’m running a little low.”

 There is only one difference between the teen who finds life is a hopeless set of unsolvable problems and the young man who is hired by Apple Computer because of his inventiveness and creativity and his ability to somehow see into the future of electronic media. There is only one difference between the businesswoman who resorts to cocaine and the world class marathon runner who breaks the tape at the finish line, the best in the world at her event. She cries as she experiences the emotion of accomplishment, the pride of place, the joy of finish, the embrace of supporters. Only one difference. There is only one difference between the party animal who practices date rape and the woman who volunteers at the reception desk at the local hospital. There is only one difference between hopelessness and hope. It is the resurrection of Jesus Christ! **Only Jesus Christ can shoo the vultures away!**

 And Jesus said, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age!”

 The teacher had been given a new job. Visit the children at the hospital. Help them to keep up their school work while they heal. She was called one evening and asked to visit a particular little boy. “They’re studying nouns and adverbs in his class now. Will you help him with his homework so he doesn’t fall behind the others?” When she got to the boy’s room, she realized she was in the burn unit. If you have ever been in a burn unit, you know that the smells can be horrible. The appearance of burn victims can be horrific. Pain is present at levels that are palpable. You have to put on sterile gear. No one had prepared her. She held her breath for a moment. She could not go on. She must go on, so she paused for prayer and went in. She stammered, “I’m the hospital teacher. Your teacher sent me to help you with nouns and adverbs.”

 The next morning a nurse on the burn unit asked her, “What did you do to that boy?” What did I do? And before she could respond, the nurse said, “We’ve been very worried about him. But ever since you were here yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He’s fighting back, responding to treatment. It’s as though he’s decided to live.” What happened? You know what happened. The boy found hope. He said, “They wouldn’t send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?”

 Without hope, we have vultures. With hope, we have Jesus Christ.

 In the middle of the threat of nuclear holocaust, what prompts us to bring children into the world? In the midst of a world at war, what prompts us to find a partner for life and marry? In the bitterness and difficulties of life, what makes us smile at a baby? What makes us celebrate a birthday? What makes us plan, create calendars, wear a wrist watch?

 Why do we go to school? Because we know that our learning will help us in the future. When we finish and get a real job, we’ll be equipped to handle it.

 Why do we have savings accounts? Why do we budget our money? Why do we save for a rainy day? Because we know we will have money for things we need in the future. We see the future and we know it will come and it will be better than the present. We have hope.

 We have hope. The future will be better. Children know that. Before the brutality of life threatens to harden their souls, children see through the eyes of hope.

 Jesus had been traveling with the disciples. They had finally reached the home of a friend where they will stay. They are tired. The disciples have been arguing among themselves about who was most important in the ministry. Jesus calls them together for a lesson. They sit down. And Jesus says, “Those who wish to be number one have to be the last of all and servant of all.” He looks around the room at the disciples and he knows they don’t get it. But there is a little child playing close by. The child probably lives there and is content with playthings on the floor. Jesus steps over the disciples and scoops up the child and stands that lovely little person in their midst. He reaches an arm around the child and hugs and says, “If you welcome one child like this in my name, you welcome me. If you welcome me, you welcome the one who sent me.” If you love this child, you love me; and when you love me, you love God. **When you love me, you have confidence that God provides a better future. You have hope.**

 Little Emma was taking an exam at her school. Her elementary class was being asked questions for the exam, “What do hibernating animals live on during the winter,” was the question. Emma knew the answer. “All winter long, hibernating animals live on the hope of the coming spring!”

 When we hear the perfect confidence in that hope in the words of a little child, we must know that there is life eternal. Truth triumphs over lies. Love overcomes hate. Life extends beyond the boundaries of death. Forgiveness, whether it’s the power to forgive others or the strength to forgive ourselves, comes with the belief that we can live more abundantly, see more clearly, and love more completely than we do right now. And that hope comes when we accept that God is in control, that God loves us and wants us close, that God forgives us, that God is prepared to welcome us into heaven when we leave this place.

 I think Kevin Carter killed himself because he did not leave the sidelines and do something to help. He chose to observe events rather than participate in them because he thought he could not make a difference. Perhaps he could not forgive himself for standing on the sidelines. Perhaps he was so filled with despair that the light of Christ could not penetrate his self-absorption. He had no faith that tomorrow could be better than today. He had no confidence that the goodness of God was present, was hand in hand with that little girl stumbling in the road, was holding onto her just as Jesus held another child before the disciples. I wonder, if instead of smoking a cigarette and crying, he had lifted that little girl into his arms and given her a drink of water and something to eat— I wonder if his nightmares would have been so frequent or so devastating.

 ***37*** *[Jesus said,] “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven;* ***38*** *give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."*

 *—Luke 6:37-38 (NRSV)*

 Jesus’ words are clear. It is not up to us to judge or condemn, whether we judge and condemn God, or others, or ourselves. Salvation, the freedom of forgiveness and a right relationship with God, is a gift from God. It is God’s work on our behalf, God’s kindness, love, care, blessings, goodness, and salvation. But it is more than that— it is all these things for us when they are totally undeserved! It is pure gift!

**Salvation is more than just a gift… it is a gift totally undeserved.**

 Kevin Carter did not deserve forgiveness. But neither do we. He never found this comfort of forgiveness, this promise of a brighter future. And so, he lived in his own personal hell, one from which he felt there was no escape. By himself, on his own, he couldn't shoo away the vultures.

 He needed hope. He needed faith. He needed forgiveness. And the only thing that shoos away the vultures is Jesus Christ.

 No one but God knows where your heart is today. If you are carrying the burden of your past because there is something so awful back there that you simply can't forgive yourself, then you know the pain of standing in the dark, the despair of believing that tomorrow will never be better than today. You know the fear that you are not good enough to be loved by God. You know the terrible lie that what you have done can’t ever be forgiven.

 But I am here to tell you that the lies told by the powers of this world are just that— lies! There is hope for you and for everyone who struggles in that darkness. You don’t need to stay there. The dreams may still come, but God will hold your hand through the dark and bring you into the light once again. And where God goes, vultures cannot follow!

 If you are carrying that awful burden today, if you are ready to begin that journey back to the light this moment, then just bow your head right where you are and say this prayer in your heart as I say it…

 *God of all good, don’t let me end up like Kevin Carter, overwhelmed by depression and anxiety, filled with dread and disappointment and fear, empty without the forgiveness you so freely offer. Rescue me from the darkness. Let me know that you forgive me. Give me the strength to forgive myself. Help me to get to know Jesus better and to accept his love. Lead me into the light. Hug me just like that little child Jesus hugged. Surround me with friends and family and others who can help me find you again. Then set my hands and my heart to work building your kingdom here on earth one smile at a time, one kindness at a time. Let your love shine through me so that others might see the hope you bring and be inspired to love you, too. I pray it in Jesus’ name. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.*

 Now, let’s pray together a Prayer of Confession…