

Remember and Never Forget
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
March 12, 2023 PM Sermon
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Deuteronomy 9:6-18; Matthew 18-20-21

This sermon grew out of my personal devotions. A while back, I was reading through Deuteronomy, and during my reading I came upon the scene in chapter 9 and it struck me. I think many of you know the setting of Deuteronomy, but just for refreshers sake, let's reset the scene. Deuteronomy is a sermon given by Moses to the second generation of Israel in the desert, as they are about to enter the Promised Land. In chapter 9 we are coming into the middle of a long talk he's giving to the descendants of those who disobeyed in the wilderness. The first generation, the ones who didn't believe they were strong enough to conquer the land, the ones who shamelessly worshipped the golden calf, they have all died off and a fresh generation has taken its place. These children show none of their parent's sheepishness. They are ready to conquer Canaan! They believe God's promises! They believe they can do it! So far in Deuteronomy they've done whatever Moses has asked them. They have defeated Og, king of Bashan and Sihon, king of the Amorites. There has been none of the whining and grumbling, none of the, "why did you take us here to die! We're hungry, we're thirsty, we want a new leader." They've been exemplary.

So now Moses gets up and speaks to the new generation. There are a couple of things that are really interesting about the way Moses talks to them. First, notice how Moses talks to them as if they were the ones who committed the sins of their Mothers and Fathers. "Remember how you aroused the anger of the Lord in the wilderness!" "You had made for yourselves idols cast in the shape of a calf." "You had turned from the way the Lord had commanded you." They weren't the ones who were leading Israel, they didn't make the golden calf, yet Moses talks to them as if they were. The topic of to what extent we are responsible for the sins and abuses of our ancestors is a hot topic in theology and politics these days. I'm not going to get into the weeds of that debate, but I will say that the way Moses talks to the 2nd generation of Israel shows that God thinks the sins of the 1st generation also belong somehow to the second generation.

In what sense do these sins belong to the second generation? It seems God holds them responsible for those sins, though not guilty for those sins. Guilt has fallen on generation 1; they died in the desert and paid the penalty for the sin. But responsibility, ownership, of the sins passes to the second generation. They can't say, "That past has nothing to do with me." They are forced to wrestle with the sins of their Fathers, to face the sins of their Fathers. It suggests something about the way we look at the sins of our forefathers and foremothers, we might not be guilty of their sins. We didn't commit them. But we can't wash our hands of them. We should take responsibility. We should take ownership.

That's interesting and important, but that's not where I want to spend time in this sermon; I want to look at something else. Notice how negative Moses is in this speech. We said that this generation has been exemplary, and faithful. They are about to enter the promised land and they are eager to do it. So, standing over these eager faithful people ready to enter the land, Moses is a little like their coach. He's like a coach about to give the pep talk before the big game, reminding them who they are, reminding them of what they'd learned and practiced before they hit the court. And given the way the team has been performing you'd think the coach would give them a real pat on the back, "I'm so proud of you guys. You played great against the Amorites, your attitude is super, way to go! Now let's go out there and win one!!"

But this coach doesn't do that. The coach doesn't celebrate their recent victories; the coach calls them to remember their past defeats! "Remember!" says Moses, "Remember and do not forget how you provoked the Lord your God to wrath in the wilderness. Remember that you are a stubborn people. Remember how you made those golden calves when I was away on the mountain. Remember how easily you turned away from God." Don't forget your sin. Don't forget that you are stiff necked troublemakers. Isn't this awfully negative? They are doing so well! Why do they have to be reminded of their sin and their guilt? He's really forceful about it too: "Remember and never forget!" Why does Moses insist on dragging these skeletons out of the closet and making Israel look at them?

Is this even a good idea? Is it healthy to focus on the sins and failures of the past? Is this a neurotic fixation? Don't we feel like there is something imbalanced about a person who can't forget her mistakes, who is always proclaiming what a miserable wretch she is? Think of how we feel about the Nederduits, that extreme sect of Reformed believers, theological cousins of ours. The Nederduits are so stricken with their own sins and failures that many of them dare not approach the Lord's table. They spend their whole life without taking communion. They won't take the bread and the wine because they are sure that God is not ready to accept such a grievous sinner at his table. Isn't it healthier to ask God to forgive your past failures, and then, once forgiven, to forget about them and move on! If you did something foolish or immoral when you were in college, do you need to remember and not forget? If you hurt someone when you were in middle school through cruel words do you need to remember and not forget? Do you need to work at keeping that in your head!?

To see if we can get to the heart of what Moses means when he says, remember and do not forget, let's leave the banks of the Jordan river and let's go to Galilee. Let's listen to Jesus talking to his disciples because I think it might help us understand Moses. Jesus is talking about forgiveness because Peter brought the subject up. Peter knows that Jesus wants him to be a forgiving person, and so he's trying to get a fix on just how merciful he's supposed to be. He begins with a generous standard. "Jesus how many times must I forgive a person who sins against me, should I do it seven times?" Peter thought he was being big hearted. Back in those days the rabbis used to say God only forgave 3 times, and the fourth time you sinned, you were out of luck. They based it on Amos where the prophet used the expression, "for three transgressions of my people, and for four, I will not revoke punishment." The rabbis interpreted that poetic phrase very literally and said three sins is God's limit, when you commit the same sin the fourth time it's curtains for you. So Peter is feeling like Mr. Mercy when he suggests that disciples of Jesus might need to forgive as many as 7 times.

But then Jesus famously raises the mercy stakes through the roof. He goes all in with grace. No, he says, not 7 times, but 77 times. He might as well have said "a bazillion times." Jesus' answer is that there is no limit to the grace and the mercy and the forgiveness that my disciples are called to show to others. Wow. How is such grace even possible? How could one person ever show that much mercy, be that long suffering, for a person who hurts them again and again and again. Is this humanly possible? In Luke 17, the way Luke reports things, when Jesus told them to forgive their brother a bazillion times, the astonished disciples said, "Lord, increase our faith!" How is it possible to be a person who can practice such strong forgiveness? How is it possible to be a person who meets other people's hardness with grace every time? Jesus tells us it is possible. It is possible if you remember and do not forget your own sins and how they have been forgiven. The energy, the heart changing energy, the transforming energy that allows us to be gracious people in an unforgiving world comes from remembering how our many sins and weaknesses and failures have been forgiven by Jesus. Now where does Jesus say that? He doesn't actually say, 'remember and do not forget your sins,' so where is such a thing even suggested?

In the parable that follows. Jesus explains why we need to forgive others a bazillion times by telling the parable of the unforgiving servant. You know the parable. A servant owes his master a huge debt, a debt measured in bazillions of dollars. The debt is more than a person could ever repay in ten lifetimes. He is guilty before his master. His life and the life of his family is forfeit. But in an act of astonishing mercy, the master forgives the servant the whole debt. Every last penny. The forgiven man goes out forgiven and free, but just down the road from his master's house he meets a friend who owes him \$500 dollars. Only instead of showing mercy, he grabs the debtor by the collar and throws him in jail. He is completely without mercy. He is completely without grace.

This man has a memory problem. This man has completely forgotten his own terrible sins and how he was released from them. If he did remember, if he walked around every day with a lively sense of how blessed he is to be free, how much kindness has been poured into his life; instead of bitterness and anger, he would be walking around with gratitude and infectious joy. He'd be a person ready to give others the benefit of the doubt; he'd be patient with other people's failing, gentler with other people's brokenness. When you think about it, so many Christian virtues depend on the memory of our sins. Christian joy, Christian gratitude, humility, compassion; all of them depend, to some extent, on remembering and not forgetting.

In the Brothers Karamazov, Dostoevsky has one of his characters named Zosima, who is a kind and good monk. In one scene he remembers his own sins and how they were forgiven and in joy he says this:

“Truly each of us is guilty for everyone and before everyone, only people do not know it, and if they knew it, the world would at once become paradise.” Which is only a more poetic way of saying what the Heidelberg Catechism said 300 years earlier: To live and die in the joy of salvation, you must know how great your sin and misery are.

A couple of qualifications here: Obviously there are different ways to remember sin; neither Jesus nor Moses calls us to remember our sin in a miserable self-hating way. You don’t remember your sins so you can dwell on what a worm you are. You remember the depths of your sin only so you can remember the heights of grace that rescued you. It’s really your forgiveness that you remember, not your sins. You only remember the sins so you can remember the mercy God has given you and the freedom you have received. You remember your forgiven sins.

And being gracious and forgiving doesn’t mean overlooking sin, it doesn’t mean we let injustice off the hook. That can’t be what Jesus means here. Right before he tells this parable he outlines a rigorous three step process for confronting sin in the church and dealing with it. If your brother sins against you confront him, if he doesn’t listen bring a church friend, if he still doesn’t listen share it with the church. And if he still doesn’t listen remove yourself from him. This is not cheap grace. We are to be people who take sin seriously, but we are to remember and never forget how our sins were paid for by Jesus our Lord.

That’s not an easy balance, but you definitely need to do both things. If you only remember the sins committed by others and the hurt they’ve given you, if all you do is recite the litany of the injustices done to you, you will end up with a victim mentality, full of bitterness and outrage. But if your memory of your hurts begins at the foot of the cross, if it begins with some time considering the suffering of Jesus, and the pain of Jesus and how he did this for you, you will find the balance. You will forgive, and you will seek justice.

When I was 11, I lived in England for a year. Coventry Cathedral is in England a few short miles from where I lived. My family visited there multiple times. It’s unlike any other cathedral in Europe because Coventry cathedral was destroyed during world war two. The Nazi’s bombed it in 1942 leaving a shell of the building that has stood since the middle ages. But instead of simply knocking down the ruins and building a new cathedral on the site of the old, the church decided to keep the shell of the old cathedral standing and then build a new cathedral right beside it. So when you visit Coventry, it’s kind of a unique experience. You enter into the burned out shell of the old. That burned out shell is like a reminder of old sins. It’s a reminder of the horrors of war and the things that people do to each other when hate is inflamed. You could stand in those walls and let your bitterness pile up. You could think of the terrible things the Germans did when they bombed the cathedral. Standing in that burned out building you brew yourself a cold cup of outrage.

But to keep that from happening, in the middle of the burned out shell there is a small altar. On top of that altar is a rough cross made from the burned timbers from the old cathedral roof. On a sign above the altar it says: “Father Forgive.” You walk into that burned out place, and that altar won’t let you forget how Jesus forgave all the terrible things you’ve done. On the cross Jesus forgave you for all the bombs you’ve dropped into other people’s lives: all those nasty things you’ve said, all those selfish things you’ve done. That altar is the place you put down the weight of your sin and of your own bitterness.

Now, forgiven loved and free, you’re ready to come into the new cathedral. You walk into the glass doors and there above the altar at the far end is a huge mosaic of the resurrected Christ. He’s sitting on the throne fully, completely alive. He’s presiding at his table ready to share his bread: “This is my body, given for the complete forgiveness of all your sins.” Sin is remembered, misery is addressed, and all of it is overcome by the grace of Jesus Christ our Lord.

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