

### “Forgive and Forget?”

Grace and Peace to you from the One who is, who was and is to come, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today I am borrowing from a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Steve Albertin from the Crossings Community in Illinois, US that he held in 2009 on our sermon text for today from the prophet Jeremiah 31:31-34

*The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.*

*It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD.*

*But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*

*No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.*

Dear congregation!

Someone has wronged you, betrayed you, stabbed you in the back. You are angry, fuming, ready to strangle them. You complain to a trusted friend about what has happened to you. He tells you, “You know, you have got to move on with your life. Continuing to stew about this is just going to eat you up. Why don't you just *forgive and forget?*”

*Forgive and forget!* Ask someone in the coffee shop what forgiveness means and that is probably what they will tell you. To forgive means to forget about it. To forgive means to stop remembering the hurt or the injustice done to you and to put all that behind you. To forgive means to move on with your life and live as if the hurt never happened.

People who offer such advice probably think they are being helpful. They probably think their advice is even comforting. They think that forgetting is at the heart of forgiveness. But how mistaken they are! I think that forgetting distorts the true nature of forgiveness. It trivializes the hurt that it is meant to heal. It deprives forgiveness of its true redeeming power. Ultimately such forgetting is humanly impossible. We might think that we are being helpful and comforting by telling someone to forgive and forget. But we are actually saddling them with a huge burden and an impossible demand.

“Forgive and forget” seems most difficult in the context of family life, especially when it comes to deep betrayal. Try to tell a wife or a husband to forgive and forget when their spouse has been unfaithful to them. A grievous betrayal has been committed. If the marriage meant anything, the sin cannot simply be forgotten. To forget means that those marriage vows were not that important. The hurt cannot simply be forgotten. The wounded spouse has a right to her pound of flesh, and a right to make her spouse pay. To simply forgive and forget makes a mockery of their marriage and belittles the depth of their pain.

God describes the relationship between him and his people as a marriage covenant, calling himself their spouse. He speaks of a deep and intimate relationship that has been betrayed and violated. God is deeply hurt by this. The ultimate God Problem is that God has a problem. What is God to do with people who not only behave badly but also want to thumb their noses at their creator? What does God do with God's law and the sinners that have broken it? At the same time, what does God do with God's deep desire to love God's people no matter what? So, you see, the depth of God's deadly diagnosis means that God is going to have to do something dramatic and costly to get God's people loved. That will take a crucified and risen Son of God.

Without such assurance, the comforting and liberating good news of gospel will always remain limited. The promise of the gospel will be muffled.

That message is difficult to preach to a sceptical world. The world cannot be so bad off and in such trouble that it would take a God willing to love the world this much. People will not accept the depth of this diagnosis and the shock of this kind of indictment unless they already know that they are tied to someone who will not let them go. It is just too scary to dangle over the cliff like this. People cannot risk admitting that they are in this much trouble unless they know that they are already loved. Such a confession is only possible if one has heard and trusted the promise of the gospel. Which is precisely what this Sunday Exaudi is urging us to do: "Hear!" "Listen!" "Trust!" this promise!

If there was ever anyone who had every right to get back and get even, get his pound of flesh and make his demands for justice, it was the prophet Jeremiah, from whose book today's sermon text is taken.

Jeremiah had dared to speak against the establishment. Contrary to the official prophets on the payroll of the king, Jeremiah warned of the coming doom because Israel had been so unfaithful. Because Jeremiah had dared to speak out, the defenders and protectors of the establishment had him arrested and imprisoned. Locked in public stocks, he was mocked and beaten by his enemies. They could not bear to hear the truth of what they had done and what God was going to do to them.

Now, Jerusalem was falling. The Babylonian hordes had descended from the north. The walls of the city had been breached. The temple was burning. The king had been captured and along with other leaders had been led away in chains to the Babylonian captivity.

You would think that Jeremiah would have been delighted with the fate of his enemies.

They were getting what they deserved. However, then he does something utterly strange. He takes what little money he has left and purchases a piece of land outside Jerusalem. How crazy is this? At a time when everyone else was selling, trying to abandon ship and get out of town with whatever money they still could get, Jeremiah does just the opposite. In the midst of destruction, he bets on the future. He invests in the land that everyone else was abandoning.

Then he utters the remarkable words of today's sermon text. Here in the midst of the shattering of the old covenant of Sinai, Jeremiah promises that God is going to make a new covenant. Unlike the old covenant written on tablets of stone, stone that could be broken and shattered, this new covenant will be written on people's hearts. As a result, they will *want to keep* it. They won't have to be continually told to shape up. Because God "will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more."

In the surprising forgiveness of this new covenant we see a foreshadowing of the same kind of forgiveness God worked in Jesus and continues to work among us today. Through Jesus' death and resurrection God forgives the sins of the world. But this forgiving is not forgetting!

God is not some sleepy old man in the sky who is oblivious to our sins. God is not like some enabling parent who always overlooks the alcohol abuse of his teenager. God is not happy with our sin, our betrayals, and our violence. But God loves us. God will not just look the other way and pretend that these things never happen. The Lord God cares too much about his unfaithful spouse to lose her. So, God pledges to make a "new covenant" with his people (v. 31).

When Jeremiah decides to use his own money to buy a piece of land and redeem it from the ownership of the Babylonians, he demonstrates the essence of the new covenant. God forgives not by forgetting but by choosing to remember Israel's sin in a new way.

What Jeremiah did is what God would do for us in Christ. Instead of holding our sins against us and making us pay, God pays... God bites his tongue. God bites the bullet. God chooses to give up his right to get his pound of flesh from us. God pays, sacrifices, and suffers. God is the one who bleeds. God gets his pound of flesh - from himself, from his "only begotten Son," Jesus dies for us, suffering punishment intended for us and in exchange offering us forgiveness and new life. This is the new covenant of love that we celebrate in the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion.

Every time we begin our worship with the rite of confession and forgiveness, Jeremiah's new covenant is re-established. Our sins are not forgotten. God remembers them. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." We remember them. "We confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves." But, then we are told the glorious good news. God has chosen to remember them in a new way. The destruction we deserve God has turned into good. How? He "has given His Son to die for us and, for his sake, forgives us all our sins."

God does not forget our sins but remembers our sins in a new way. God does not hold them against us. God forgives us.

When we believe this amazing promise, everything changes. We forgive those who have wronged us. We don't forget what has happened, but we choose to remember the wrongs in a new way. We no longer hold them against those who hurt us. Instead, we join God in breaking the painful and deadly cycle of getting back and getting even that so torments this world of ours.

Such forgiveness can change people. This is the new kind of life that the new covenant makes possible. Such forgiveness is not something we have to do or else. That was life under the old covenant. Under the new covenant such forgiveness is a gift through which we can partner with God through Jesus in redeeming the world. What the world meant for humiliation and ridicule, we can change and transform into goodness and life. By refusing to demand our pound of flesh, by refusing to get back by getting even, but instead choosing to bite the bullet, to turn the other cheek, to be generous, to love our enemies, to be merciful as our Father is merciful, and to forgive but not forget, a new world begins to take shape in the midst of the old. The Kingdom of God begins to arrive. And what the world meant for evil, God has transformed into good.

There - did you hear it? God's deadly diagnosis matters. Why? Because only when we realize how deeply we are in trouble, we are even more amazed by what God did in Christ and what comfort that is for our lives. A Christian rock group called »Lost And Found« put it like this: "If the good news is not good news, then the good news is not the good news."

Thanks be to God for His Great Faithfulness. Because of the crucified and risen Christ, it is exceptionally good news. Amen.