

Redeeming Love

April 10, 2016 – The Third Sunday of Easter (Year C)

First Lutheran Church, St. Peter, MN

Text: Acts 9:1-20, John 21:1-19

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen.

When people ask me how my internship here at First Lutheran is going, they will often ask me one of two questions: “What is your favorite part?” or “What has surprised you the most?” And for me, usually the answers are the same. I have been surprised how much I have loved teaching confirmation! Seriously, this congregation has some great young people and working through the Old Testament with the 7th and 8th graders this year has been a lot of fun. Starting with creation in Genesis, we have worked through the story of the Hebrew people and their relationship with God. And if there is one common theme throughout the Hebrew Bible, it is that no matter how much the people manage to mess things up, God is always there to love them, forgive them, and renew the relationship. This past week, we were talking about the prophets and their messages to the people. During the small group discussion time, I was walking around the room and I overheard one of the students tell her group, “I think I can pass this class if I just say ‘God will always love us and forgive us no matter what.’” I instantly started grinning as I walked away because I knew she got it! That’s the heart of the gospel that we see in the Old Testament – that no matter how badly or how often the people mess up and fall away from God, God forgives them and loves them. And if there’s one thing I hope the students remember from this year, that’s it, because it’s just as true and just as important and just as life-giving for us today as it was for the Israelites back then.

Today’s readings give us two more examples of this same pattern.

As we heard in the first reading, Saul was a persecutor of the early church. And really, he was a brutal, violent, zealous man. He was involved with the killing of Stephen, the first Christian martyr; he arrested and imprisoned countless members of the church; and was headed to Damascus “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” But as he’s literally on his way to continue this persecution, Jesus appears to him and speaks to him. “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” Jesus could have acted harshly with this man who was literally killing his followers, but instead he comes to him in love. Instead of retaliating against Saul, Jesus chooses to forgive him, redeem him, and use him as his instrument to spread the good news.

And in today’s gospel reading, we see Peter’s redemption as well. Peter, whose denial of Jesus during his trial on Maundy Thursday was still fresh in his mind and the minds of the other disciples. That night, Peter was warming himself beside a charcoal fire outside the high priest’s house when he was asked three times if he was one of Jesus’ disciples. And, fearing for his own life, Peter denied knowing Jesus each time. So when Jesus appears on the lakeshore in today’s reading, the gospel writer makes clear connections to that night in holy week. Just like that night there is a charcoal fire and Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. It’s as if Jesus is undoing Peter’s threefold denial by prompting a threefold confession of love. And each of those three times, Jesus invites Peter to rejoin the work of the disciples. Even though Peter abandoned Jesus at his time of greatest need, Jesus still redeems Peter and re-commissions him to serve his church.

The scriptures are clear that both Saul and Peter were broken men, not living the lives God would intend for them. But despite their brokenness, Jesus comes to both of them: to Saul, the zealous persecutor of the church, and Peter, the disciple who abandoned his teacher and

friend. Jesus comes and brings his love for them. And these two broken men, Peter and Saul (who will later be renamed Paul) become the two most important and influential leaders in early Christianity. When Jesus comes to Peter and Saul, he offers them abundant and redeeming grace. And just as he came to Saul on the road to Damascus and Peter on the lakeshore, Jesus comes to us with that same abundant grace. Grace to forgive and to love. Grace to restore and re-commission. Grace beyond our wildest dreams.

Now this grace may look differently for each of us. It could be a dramatic, life changing experience like a prisoner in Illinois who writes, “Jesus has the power to change lives and circumstances...Not until [Paul’s] life-changing encounter with Jesus was he able to see the error of his ways...I too encountered Jesus Christ and he gave me the strength to change my life. It was once a drug-dealing gangbanger but now I am an apostle of Jesus Christ.”

This grace could be an unexpected forgiveness, like the Connecticut man who recently shot at his neighborhood mosque following the Paris attacks. When the mosque learned the attacker was their neighbor, they invited him to visit their community. They talked with him. They explored his preconceptions. They forgave the man and formed a meaningful relationship with him. Now they are advocating that his prison sentence be lessened.

It could be smaller acts – the unexpected smile on a gloomy day. The hug from a friend when you’re feeling down. But I’m willing to bet that each of us have experienced this redeeming grace at least once in our lives – at least once this week – and likely many more times. What does this act of grace look like for you? When have you experienced God’s redemption in your own life?

The other night during confirmation, we were talking about the message of the prophets that was so accurately summarized by that student, “I think I can pass this class if I just say ‘God

will always love us and forgive us no matter what.”” I told the class that I know I repeat myself a lot when I make that point week after week, but how I hope they remember that. And then one of the adult leaders spoke up and said, “I think it’s actually really powerful to hear that every week. It’s like going to church and receiving communion and feeling God’s love and forgiveness for you each week.” And I think she’s exactly right. Each week, we come here, broken and in need of love and forgiveness from our God. And each week, we are given a meal that Christ has prepared for us, full of his redeeming love. A meal where he says to us, “This is my body given for you. This is my blood shed for you.”

The last sentence of John’s gospel, just a few lines after where our reading ended today, says these beautiful words, “But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” The world itself cannot contain the immensity of God’s grace for us. Whenever we are lost, whenever we are broken, whenever we need hope, Jesus will come to us on the road to Damascus or will show up on the lakeshore full of redeeming grace. Why? Because “God will always love us and forgive us no matter what.”

Thanks be to God.