Sunday, November 22, 1998
LAST MINUTE FORGIVENESS
Luke 23:33-42

In a Bible study group which I was leading, we were studying the passage from Luke's gospel which describes the last minutes of the life of Jesus as He was dying on the cross. In this part of the story, Luke tells us, "Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with Him."

One of the criminals, as they were dying, kept taunting Jesus. He said, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us." However, the other criminal was repentant. He said, "Do you not fear God, since we are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he continued, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

One member of the Bible study group said, "It isn't fair. Why be good? Here's a criminal who has spent most of his life doing evil, and at the last minute, as he is about to die, he repents, asks to be forgiven, and is told that he will be in heaven immediately when he dies. He gets the same reward as someone who has been good most of his or her life."

Another member of the group said, "It's the same in life. Look at the world around us. It doesn't pay to be a good, upright citizen. Someone gets into a lot of trouble, gets caught, maybe is fined and serves a short sentence in prison, then writes a book about it and becomes rich and famous."

A third member of the group said, "What good is it to try to be a believing and practicing Christian? This man had never even been baptized. He held no theory of the atonement, knew nothing about Christian doctrine or the Bible. He had never received Holy Communion. It isn't fair."

To answer these legitimate questions, let's first examine the basic assumption behind them. Next, we will look more closely at the two men who were killed with Jesus, especially at the one who received last-minute forgiveness and salvation, and what we can learn from him about the nature of God and God's grace. Finally, we are going to look at ourselves and our need for forgiveness.

The one big assumption that too many of us never question is that it would be more fun to live a life of irresponsibility or a life of ease and laziness if only we had the means to do so. Remember the story of the forgiving father, the prodigal son, and the elder brother. The brother who stayed home and then complained when his father gave a party for his younger brother and welcomed him home assumed that his younger brother, when he was off spending his inheritance, was having a better time and enjoying life more.

Too many people today believe in the same fantasy. We assume that if we were free of all moral restrictions or if we had enough money so that we didn't have to work and could lead a lazy life, that would be more fun and more fulfilling than being good, having responsibility, and living a productive, useful life.

That's one of the fantasies which sells lottery tickets. It's based on the assumption that having enough money solves all problems and that luck is better than hard work. We have updated the Cinderella story from finding the prince and the glass slipper to hitting the jackpot. It's like a magic wand and fairy godmother all put together.

One of the more depressing books I've read in the past ten years has the title The Windsor Style. It's about the Duke and Duchess of Windsor and the kind of life they lived before they died.

The Duke of Windsor was the former King of England who gave up his throne to marry Wallis Warfield Simpson. In the book, he is quoted as saying, "You know what my day was today? I got up late and then I went with the Duchess and watched her buy a hat." That line sums up their empty existence better than any biography ever could.

The Duchess is quoted as saying, "I would rather shop than eat," and her days were filled with fittings and having her hair done. The Windsors dined out every night, all dressed up, or dined at home, all dressed up. They relished the minor arts of exquisite living, dressing, eating, and entertaining.

The book overwhelms the reader with the details of a pampered life and ultimately presents the Duke and Duchess as two absurd and useless people — being stylish, endlessly stylish, because that was all they had: their style.

One of their servants, who had been with them for many years, recalled that their lives were reduced to spending quarrelsome evenings over a bottle of whiskey. They had nothing and no one. They were just two lonely old, unhappy people.

Contrast their lives with the life of someone like Mother Teresa. Who had the more fulfilling life? Why be good? Not because of expecting some kind of special reward in the life after this life, but because it is its own reward here and now. Why be good? Because being good is being true to our basic nature. Why be good? Because God is good, and we are created in the image of God. Why be good? Because life without goodness is a life where priests and Levites pass by on the other side while their brother suffers. Life without goodness is getting indigestion while others go to bed hungry, and it makes life unbearable — not just for others but for yourself.

Even though the criminal on the cross received last-minute salvation because of God's grace, think of the fulfilling life he missed before that. Think of all those wasted years. Would you trade your life for his?

This leads to our second question: what do we know about these two criminals who were crucified with Jesus? We don't know what crimes they had committed or how long they had been in trouble. We do know that one, even while dying, was cynical and had no sensitivity, while the other felt remorse and was repentant. The repentant one was the one who admitted he had done wrong. He did not make excuses or deny his guilt. Deep within him, there was a recognition of the essential moral quality of life and the world.

He blamed no one but himself. "We suffer justly," he admitted. He did not excuse himself by putting it off on his ancestors, his upbringing, or his environment. Because he recognized his own wrongdoing, he was able to recognize the goodness of God as revealed in Jesus, which the other criminal could not.

Therefore, in his dying moments, he experienced both the goodness and the compassion of God. This is what we commonly call God's grace.

But why wait until we are dying to seek forgiveness so that we can experience God's grace? Hopefully, we won't have to wait until our time of death and miss out on much of the joy of living.

Is there anyone hearing this sermon who believes he or she is not in need of forgiveness? Before you make up your mind, let's be sure you understand what is meant by "sin." So often, when we use that word, we have in mind a specific list of gross iniquities — murder, robbery, lust, excessive greed. These plainly are sins. But before any person tries to avoid his or her need for forgiveness, consider these other categories of sin.

There are sins of temperament — sullenness, vindictiveness, peevishness, jealousy, bad temper. How prevalent they are, and how much harm they do.

There are also sins of neglect. It is not only the things we do, but also the things we leave undone that haunt us — the letters we did not write, the words we did not speak, the opportunity we did not take. How insistently Jesus stressed the frequency of this type of sin. What was the matter with the person who buried his one talent? What did he do? That was the trouble — he did nothing. He missed his chance. What was the trouble with the priest and Levite who left the victim in the ditch by the roadside? What did they do? They did nothing.

Sins of the flesh, sins of temperament, sins of social attitude, sins of neglect — I'm sure there are others, but this ought to take in most of us and cause us to wonder whether or not we are in need of forgiveness.

Also, remember this: forgiveness is not easy. It is hard to forgive sins — hard for us, and hard for Christ. "Which is easier," said Jesus in the story of the crippled man, "to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or 'Rise up and walk'?" I believe Jesus was implying that it is easier to tell someone to walk. It is easier to meet any other human need than to say, "Your sins are forgiven."

At first, that sounds strange coming from Jesus. We have usually thought it was easy for Him to forgive. Why then was it hard for Him to forgive? Because He took sin and evil so seriously. It is easy to condone sin, to make light of it; but when one takes it seriously, it is hard to forgive. And that is because to truly forgive someone, you have to give a part of yourself, and that is not easy.

It is also hard to forgive someone because forgiveness is such a tremendous experience for the one who is forgiven. To be sure, it is wonderful to be forgiven, but it is more than that. To do somebody wrong, to be alienated from him or her, and then through forgiveness to be restored to the old friendship and trusted again — surely that is the most humbling experience that a proud person can go through. That's why some people have so much difficulty accepting forgiveness.

For you see, there is one thing that forgiveness does — one thing only. It does not take away the fact of sin; the criminal on the cross had done wrong. Forgiveness does not take away the memory of sin; the criminal who was forgiven will never forget it. Forgiveness does not take away the consequences of sin. But one thing forgiveness does: it re-establishes personal relationships that have been broken and makes those relationships deeper and wider.

All of this is what we mean when we associate the forgiveness of God with the cross of Christ. I do not care what theory of atonement you might have, or whether you have any theory at all. What the death of Jesus on the cross means above all else is that for God to forgive, there is a cost involved.

Consider this illustration. If you should grossly wrong your wife and then penitently ask her forgiveness, and she would say, “Never mind, it’s not important,” that would solve no problem. It would mean that she did not care what you did, that you really weren’t very important to her.

However, a truly caring wife would go deeper than that. Two things would be in her: first, a love deep and wide enough to forgive; and second, a character, an uprightness that would be wounded and crushed by your sin. So her forgiveness would cost her something. In her forgiveness, she would be giving a part of herself, and that is not easy.

Everything I have said in this sermon has been leading up to this conclusion: no one’s sin is ever done with until it has come through this process of forgiveness. Either your sin has been forgiven, or else it is yet in you as sin. This is a fact of life.

Although our Christian faith underscores this, it is a universal truth no matter what our religious faith or beliefs might be.

One of the most insightful novels ever written is The Scarlet Letter. It features Arthur Dimmesdale with his unconfessed, unforgiven sin. How shall he be rid of it? As a man of intellect, he tries to absorb himself in study. But that is no way out. He is a minister; he will preach sermons and save souls. But that is no way out. He is a servant and will go from door to door, humbly helping people. But that is no way out. There is only one way — penitence, confession, and forgiveness. That is what the one criminal on the cross also discovered in the last minutes of his life. It was then that Jesus was able to say to him, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” It was His way of saying, “Today you have opened yourself to fully experiencing the presence and love of God.” What better news is there than that, no matter if it is in the last minutes of your life or hopefully much earlier?

I want to end this sermon with a quotation from Harry Emerson Fosdick, who said to his congregation at Riverside Church one Sunday: “Any preacher who takes preaching in earnest cannot look out over congregations like this, week after week, without thinking of all the unadvertised needs that must exist beneath our respectable exteriors. Who can sum them up in their infinite variety? But deepest of all, the unforgiven sins. There must be many here today. Go down into that secret place. Unlock that hidden door. Take out that unforgiven sin. For your soul’s sake, get rid of it. But there is only one way. Whatever theology you hold, it is the way of the cross — penitence, confession, restitution, pardon.”

Then you will experience the same paradise here and now which Jesus promised the dying thief on the cross. Amen.