Sunday, November 21, 2004
DEATH BED FORGIVENESS
Luke 23:33-43

It's never too late to forgive others who have wronged you. It's never too late to ask for forgiveness from others and from God. Forgiveness is at the center of this story from Luke's gospel, which takes place while Jesus is dying on the cross. Luke writes: "Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with Jesus." When all three had been nailed to their crosses, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." As he was dying, he asked God to forgive those who were killing him. Amazing!

The two criminals who were being crucified with him, one on each side, heard his prayer for forgiveness. One of them had trouble believing what he heard. He said, and I'm paraphrasing, "Are you out of your mind? Why would you ask God to forgive those who are killing us? We are all about to die. If you're the Messiah, save yourself and us."

He was repeating what he had heard others in the crowd say: "You claim to have saved others. Save yourself if you're God's chosen one."

The man on the cross on the other side of Jesus had a completely different response. He was thinking, "If this man can ask God to forgive the people who are killing him, maybe he will also ask God to forgive me." Then, in his own way, he asked Jesus to assure him that God had forgiven him. Jesus did this by stating: "Today you will be with me in paradise." In other words, "God has forgiven you. You are saved. You will be with God forever."

Every time I've been in a Bible study group and we've discussed this story, at least one person in the group will say, "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 paradise immediately when he dies. He gets the same reward as someone who has tried to be good most of his or her life."

Inevitably someone else will say, "It happens all the time and not only when a person is dying. Listen to the news. 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 time in prison, then writes a book about it and becomes rich and famous. Or some high-powered corporate executive leads a company into bankruptcy and is rewarded with a golden parachute of 50 million dollars."

Then another person adds, "What good is it to try to be a believing and practicing Christian? The man on the cross next to Jesus had never even been baptized. He had no understanding of the doctrine of the atonement. He knew nothing at all about Christian beliefs or the Bible. He had never received Holy Communion. It isn't fair."

These appear on the surface to be good questions. However, let's examine the assumptions on which they are based. The one big assumption that most people never consider is that they are assuming it would be more fun to live a life of irresponsibility, or a life of crime, or a life of ease and laziness if only they had the means to do so.

Recall the story of the forgiving father, the prodigal son, and the older brother. The brother who stayed home and then complained when his father gave a party for the younger brother and welcomed him home assumed that his younger brother, when he was away and wasting his

life, was having a better time and enjoying life more than if he had stayed home and worked in the family business.

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

That's one of the fantasies that sell lottery tickets. It's based on the assumption that having enough money solves all problems and that luck is better than work. Some people have updated the Cinderella story from finding the prince and the glass slipper to a lottery ticket that will perform like a magic wand and fairy godmother put together.

I've used this example before in a sermon, but it fits here as well. One of the most depressing books I've read in the last 15 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." It's that line that sums up better than any biography ever could the utter nothingness of their lives.

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. One of their servants who had been with them for many years described their declining years as spending quarrelsome evenings over a bottle of whiskey. They had nothing and no one. They were two lonely, unhappy people.

Contrast their lives with the life of someone like Mother Teresa. Who had the most fulfilling life? Why be good? Not because of expecting some kind of special reward in the life after this life, but because goodness is its own reward here and now. Why be good? Because being good is being true to your basic nature. Why be good? Because you are created in God's image; because God made you for the purpose of being good. Why be good? Because life without goodness is priests and Levites passing by on the other side of the road while their brother suffers. Life without goodness is getting indigestion while others go to bed hungry, and in the end, you live in a world that is not worth living for anyone.

Even though the criminal on the cross, because of God's grace, received last-minute salvation, 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 another question. What is known about the two criminals who were crucified with Jesus? No one knows what crimes they had committed or how long they had been in trouble. We do know that one, even while dying, was cynical while the other felt remorse and was repentant. The repentant one was the true realist. He knew 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.

He blamed no one but himself. "We suffer justly," he admitted. He did not excuse himself by putting it off on his ancestors or his upbringing or his environment. He was at the same time

able to recognize the goodness of God as revealed in Jesus. Therefore, in his dying moment, he was able to experience and accept the goodness and compassion of God. It is what is commonly called God's grace.

Now let's look at ourselves and our own need to forgive and to be forgiven so that we can experience God's grace and be truly thankful during this Thanksgiving season. I'm sure that no one listening to this sermon wants to wait until you are near death to know forgiveness and to be forgiving and thereby miss out on much of the joy in life.

Of course, you could say, "I don't need forgiveness. There's nothing I've done wrong. I'm not a sinner." Before you make up your mind, let's be sure you understand what is meant by "sin." So often when that word is used, you could be thinking that it applies primarily to a specific list of bad behaviors such as killing someone, stealing, adultery, greed, or cheating. That's a good beginning, but your list is too short. There are sins of temperament, sullenness, vindictiveness, and jealousy. There are also sins of neglect. It is not only the things you do but also the things you leave undone that can haunt you. Jesus talked a lot about this kind 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 sin of the priest and Levite who left the victim in the ditch by the roadside? What did they do? They did nothing.

Here's what Madeleine L'Engle wrote in her book, "Penguins and Golden Calves." The Good Shepherd goes out into the wilderness after the one lost sheep and brings it home rejoicing. There does seem to be more excitement over the return of the lost sheep than there is over all the good little sheep who stayed home. There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. That may seem a little unfair to all the good people who have never done anything wrong and have nothing to repent about, but since I am not one of them (and neither is anybody else I am close to), it really isn't much of a problem. I never get through a day without needing to repent over something, and I think that's true of most of us.

Everyone needs forgiveness, and everyone needs to be forgiving of others. Forgiveness is not easy. That's because you cannot truly forgive someone if you do not at the same time forgive everyone who has ever hurt you. It has to be all or nothing. Forgiveness is not easy, but when you are forgiving of everyone, a huge burden is lifted from you.

If you are forgiving as God is forgiving; if you do what is right and good and true, you will often be appreciated for your goodness, but not necessarily. However, there's one more step in this process which Jesus taught and lived. If you can find personal meaning in doing good without the world's applause, you are truly free. You are free to do what's right and good whether or not others appreciate it. You are free to be who you really are. You are free to be what God meant you to be.

I want to end this sermon by quoting from a remarkable book which a friend gave me a few weeks ago. The book title is ANYWAY. The subtitle is The Paradoxical Commandments. The author, Kent M. Keith, has a list of ten paradoxical commandments which advise you to do the right thing whether anyone appreciates your goodness or not.

1. People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. Love them anyway.

2. If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Do good anyway.

3. If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway.

4. The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.

5. Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway.

6. The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds. Think big anyway.

7. People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs. Fight for a few underdogs anyway.

8. What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.

9. People really need help but may attack you if you do help them. Help people anyway.

10. Give the world the best you have, and you'll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you have anyway.

I want to add one more paradoxical commandment to this list. When you forgive people, they will not always accept your forgiveness. When you ask someone to forgive you, he or she may not be willing to do so. Be forgiving of others anyway. God has already forgiven you. Amen.