

“... and Forget”

Date: 3 March 2019 Communion Sunday

Text: 2 Corinthians 5:14 - 21

Rev. Peter Coutts

My son Daniel tells me that there is an iPhone app for Roman Catholics to help them organize their confessions. It provides a method for the examination of one's conscience, organizes what you want to confess into the Act of Contrition (the prayer for forgiveness), and puts it all together into a format ready to be used in the confessional. Now in the Roman Catholic tradition, once the priest absolves you of your sin, that sin is truly forgiven and gone. But Daniel tells me that it really isn't, because that iPhone app keeps a record of your sins, for weeks, months, years. God forgives your sins, but apparently Apple won't let you forget them.

I think this story is a little parable on human nature. For many people their sense of sin – what ever it is – can never be shed. It can feel like our sin can cling so closely, as it says in Hebrews 12. And it clings because of remorse, or regret, or guilt. It can cling because we feel unworthy of forgiveness. In my first congregation we had an 80 year old woman who could not bring herself to take Communion, because she felt certain that she was not worthy. Her son, a Presbyterian minister, tried and tried to convince her otherwise, but couldn't. And it saddened him, because he knew his mother to be a saint in everything. But she saw herself always as an unworthy sinner.

Our sin can cling so closely because grace can seem too good to be true. But this reading from 2nd Corinthians is emphatic that our forgiveness is real, is for now, is for forever. Paul declares if anyone is in Christ they are a new creation. New. Everything old has passed away. Look, everything has become new, he writes! All this is from God, who has made it this way, for God has reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ.

Sin can cling so closely because we really don't appreciate that Christ has truly transformed us in God's sight. Paul wrote here something we can easily affirm: “we are convinced that one has died for all”. Christ has died for all: for all people, for all sin. He has dealt with sin for each of us. And that is a transformative act. Paul says here that our own transformation is like this: if we are in Christ we share in Christ's death, we have died to the old way. If we are in Christ, we too have been resurrected to a new life, a new state before God. Paul says here, we are now a whole new creation. We've been given a whole new beginning. Everything for us has become new! Why? As Paul says here, for our sake God has made his Son bear our sin so that in him we become new for God.

Our sin can also cling so closely to us because other people can't forget...and won't let us forget. Years ago in Scotland there was a man who attended seminary, passed all his courses and attained an M.Div. degree. He then sought a call to a congregation and ordination, but some people thought it would be very inappropriate and wrong. His case went all the way to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. At issue was the man's history: he was a convicted murderer who had done time. The question was: was it appropriate (!) for a murderer to become an ordained minister? Well, the other part of his story was that he had not been a Christian, but while in prison he had a conversion experience. He spent time learning about Jesus and the Christian faith. That changed his worldview, how he behaved in prison...how he developed an informal ministry among his fellow prisoners...how he began to discern a call to ministry. The General Assembly had to struggle with passages like the one we read from 2nd Corinthians. They had to ask themselves, "Do we really believe that anyone who is in Christ is a new creation, with everything old having passed away?" Their answer was "Yes!" and the man was ordained and went on to serve a congregation. This tale prompts us to wonder if there are any relationships we have where we won't let another let go of their sin even if God already has?

Sin no longer clings to us. So Paul's advice to us would be: let go of your remorse, let go of your regret, let go of your guilt. You are a new creation. Do you feel unworthy of forgiveness? Well, we probably all should. But that's the nature of grace: the forgiveness we've been given is undeserved, unmerited. But when we recognize that it is grace, which comes to us because God loves us, the weight of sin can be shed, and replaced with joy, for God has done something wonderful for you!

So Paul says here, change your perspective on your life. Live as that new creation. The love of Christ, Paul says, urges us on to live for the one who has done this for us. Live in gratitude of your forgiveness. Celebrate... rejoice in what God has done for us.

Now perhaps for some folk that is easier said than done. Sin clings more closely to some of us than others. But here is a help. Soon we begin Lent. The light of the cross falls over this six week period as we look towards Easter. Perhaps you can make this Lenten season to be a time to reflect on the sin that clings closely. To see it more clearly in the light of the cross. To recognize that, in light of the cross, we can shed it's burden. You are a new creature, even though you may not feel like it. But in the journey of this season perhaps you can come to embrace it more. For if we can, Easter can be a true time of joy, to say and celebrate with gratitude "I am forgiven. I can forget". I can live anew, recognizing that the sin I might think holds me down is really, really gone.

Today we come to the table of our Lord. A common, traditional invitation to the table is the following words, "This is the joyful feast of the people of God!" Joyful. Jesus said on the night before his death,

“this is my body broken for you....this is my blood shed for you...” Why? Another traditional phrase: “for the remission of sin.” Remission: the cancelling of a debt or a charge....forgiveness of sin. It is here that we see we are a new creation...created anew because of the cross.

Come to the table...know this joy...and may you know a liberation that can inspire you to live as that new creation, following in the ways of the one who renewed you.