

“And It’s 1,2,3 Strikes You’re...”
+ 13 Pentecost A +,
Ezekiel 33:7-11; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20
Sept 7,2014

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!
The texts for this morning’s message are the lessons for this day.

Did you know that Jesus never said “forgive and forget” – it really isn’t the ‘eleventh commandment’ as some are wont to call it.

Only God has the ability to truly “**forgives and forgets**” as an act of God’s divine will, or rather, God promises to “remember our sins no more” which means something even better than forgetting; it means He no longer connects the sins that we carry around as a heavy burden and “baggage” – God no longer connects those sins to you, or to me.

That becomes quite clear in the Gospel when we hear familiar words about the sins we suffer, the wrongs we inflict and what to do about them. “If another member of the church sins against you” is what the Assisting Minister read - very inclusive and not out of the realm of possibility but the Greek word “brother” is a stronger relationship word than “member.”, I think just about every believer has heard these words about talking to a brother or sister in Christ who is trapped in some sin, has caused great offense and is not turning to God for forgiveness. They are usually included in church constitutions. But I’m not really happy about the way I have seen them used, or rather misused. Let me put it this way. Sin and conflict make everyone uncomfortable, except perhaps the perpetrator, just perhaps because people caught in a wrong are often just too uncomfortable to face it and when we are uncomfortable we want to do two things. 1. Make the discomfort stop and 2. Make it stop right now! It’s still baseball season in places other than Minnesota Twin territory so let’s look at this text through the lens of an old baseball phrase: “**And It’s 1,2,3, Strikes, You’re Out**” at the old ball game.

The thing is, life, and especially life among Jesus’ brothers and sisters isn’t a game. The family of faith has been “called out” but not out of the game, rather, we are called out of our sinful state by the gift of faith to go INTO the world with the Good News of the Gospel . We have been called to be the body of Christ in the world to bring Gospel healing to this sadly broken world. Yet, to be perfectly honest outsiders look at the church and often wonder why we cannot manage to heal ourselves as individuals or have better agreement, unity and action in our Christian denominations before we take on the world and its ills.

What Jesus offered was a process, by which the injured are re-empowered to confront their oppressor and supported by fellow believers and if necessary, vindicated by the whole body of believers. I want to talk about that “Gentile and tax collector” thing in just a minute. But before I get there, let me say it again: Jesus gave us a process by which people can be reconciled; a process that sometimes takes a long time; and yes, sometimes doesn’t happen this side of heaven. And that means, together we learn how to put aside impatience and to live a while in the discomfort of restoring relationships.

Some of you will still recognize the name Corrie ten Boom. I want to keep her name alive for a little longer because as a survivor of the holocaust, imprisoned in a Nazi death camp for the “crime” of protecting Jews from extermination, she experienced the death of family, the loss of her home, the loss of her innocence. And when she was finally freed at the end of World War 2, she painfully confessed how hard she struggled to forgive those who had wronged her so horribly---a wound re-opened one day when she found herself looking into the face of one of the guards who had imprisoned her.

She confessed her struggle to a pastor (not because we’re the wisest or anything like that) but that man must have been especially wise and compassionate because, having heard her story, he pointed her gently to look at a nearby church steeple and the bells hanging there and he reminded her that one pull on the rope won’t ring the bell; that rope gets pulled over and over by someone determined to make that bell ring.

Forgiveness, he said, is like pulling that rope; it’s something you have to work at; it may take what seems like forever, but by the grace of God, eventually the anger begins to dissipate, the wound begins to close and healing starts to happen.

That’s the power of forgiveness; the power Jesus won for us on the cross and the power He gave us when we were baptized. Forgiving isn't about forgetting; it isn't instant amnesia where we no longer remember what’s been done; it doesn't take away the scars. Forgiveness is the declaration that just as Jesus’ blood covered my sins, so His blood covers the sins of others.

Some may not want it, but the healing comes in offering it. “Carrying a grudge,” someone once said “is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die from it.” It doesn't work that way and sometimes even a former friend becomes like a “Gentile” or “tax collector” to you, so we ought to take a minute for that today, too.

I can’t think of two groups more universally hated by the Jews 2,000 years ago. Gentiles, because they were often pagan idol worshipers and Tax collectors because they were often fellow Jews who sold out their own people to the Romans so they could make a handsome living by gouging their fellow Jews. And so the logical conclusion is that Jesus was giving His blessing to the three strikes and you’re out rule.

But then again, look at the people Jesus hung around with: tax collectors and Gentiles—that was the scandal of His public life. He even died for them, for us. Do you have any “tax collectors and Gentiles” in your life? I expect you do; I do, too. Everybody does. Jesus isn't calling us to pretend everything is all right or to sweep everything under the rug. But He is calling us to love the unlovable, even if that means loving from a safe distance; even if you have to put some space between yourself and the one who harmed you.

And if that seems like an unhealthy avoidance, I take my comfort in this: Jesus said “follow me.” He didn't say “be me perfectly.” Only Jesus could live out that love perfectly – could say, “Father forgive them” about the people killing him and really, truly mean it 100% Jesus knows our faults; He knows our failings. He knows how tough it is to love and

forgive, which is why He does exactly that for struggling sinners like us. He loves us. He forgives us. He lives among us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Now may God who enlivens and preserves His church by His perpetual mercy, remove from us all that is harmful and lead us toward all that gives life and salvation.