

Touched by Forgiveness

Luke 24:36-48

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Rev. Laurie Crelly, East Church UCC

Gran Rapids MI

The book "Here I Stand" is a biography of the life of Martin Luther. In this book we learn how Martin first felt called to the ministry, "In 1505 21 year old Martin Luther walking toward village of Stotternheim when a raging storm blew up and a bolt of lightning lit the sky with a flash, knocking Martin to the ground. "St Anne help me!" he cried "I will become a monk." Martin had grown up in a medieval culture filled with talk of devils and demons and angels and heaven and hell and the great judgement day. A culture of great fear. He thought the lightning had been launched at him by God as a message, a glimpse of the terror of Judgement Day. Martin knew he needed to preserve his soul and the best way to do that was to become a monk. So off to the monastery he went to seek God's grace and mercy."

I wonder if the first disciples had a similar fear after Jesus was killed. We know they were afraid of being arrested, but did they also fear God's judgment for their own betrayal of Jesus? All of them had failed to stand up to the authorities when they came to arrest Jesus, they abandoned Jesus and fled in fear. Peter even, famously denied Jesus three times after swearing he would die for Jesus if needed. Just a few days later they start hearing stories of Jesus' body missing, and people seeing Jesus. Is it a ghost, a spirit back from the dead to haunt those who failed him?

Yet, in nearly every encounter people have with the Risen Christ, Jesus first says, "peace be with you." I don't think this was just a standard greeting, I think Jesus was trying to assure them they would not die. Even though Christ had been wrongfully killed, he would not return hate with hate. His dying words on the cross included,

“Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” Instead, Christ’s death made it possible for love to conquer hate and death. Even in the face of such violence and injustice, Jesus responded in love, compassion, and grace.

Yes, fear can be an effective motivator, but is it really what God wants? Can we really love God if we are constantly afraid of God? Martin Luther struggled with this very thing. Let me continue with his story.

“At the end of his first year, he was made a priest and invited to celebrate his first mass. Martin’s family came for the occasion, the chapel was filled, the psalms were sung. Then Martin took his place behind the altar and began. But just moments in he was struck by sheer terror – here he was, in his own words, “a miserable and little pygmy...dust and ashes and full of sin” daring to speak to the living, eternal and fearsome God.

Martin got through the mass and kept going as a monk, but those experiences capture his terrible internal burdens. He got to the point where he was convinced that God was so pure and holy no-one could ever hope to be saved. All would be abandoned to the torments of hell. Martin in his own word says “More than once (I) was driven to the very abyss of despair so that I wished I had never been created. Love God? I hated God!” Those are some powerful emotions created by deep fear of God and Martin’s perceived ideas of what God demanded of us. A standard that even Martin could not maintain.

It took Martin several more years, until he came to a new understanding of the cross and the call to discipleship. “And then in 1513, 8 years after that thunderstorm, 7 years after that terrible mass. He was lecturing on the book of Psalms at the University of Wittenburg, then in 1515 on Romans, then in 1516 on Galatians. It was during those studies Luther discovered a life transforming insight from the gospel – that God’s requirement for us is not perfection but faith. “My situation was that, although an

impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him...Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith...whereas before the 'justice of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love"ⁱ

Just as Martin Luther experienced a loving and just God full of grace and forgiveness that transformed his life and thinking about God. So too the Disciples found themselves touching the resurrected Christ, the embodiment of God's unfailing love and grace. It was this extraordinary offering of grace that had broken the cycle of violence and opened us up to experience the depth of God's love for the world. This expression of peace and forgiveness extended not only to the disciples, but to all the world through the cross.

In Sharon Baker's book "Executing God" she raises concern of our theology of redemption that relies on models of redemption founded on concepts of retaliation, retribution, or remuneration.ⁱⁱ She says, "In order to remain consistent with the image of a loving, compassionate, merciful, and just God, we need to rethink our ideas about forgiveness. We might want to surrender our previously held beliefs about Jesus paying God or Jesus suffering our punishment before God will forgive sin."

She goes on to explain how God's redemption shifts away from the concept of an economy of violence to an economy of forgiveness, a pardoning of past debts that will not be paid.

"The definition of the Greek word for "forgiveness" itself leads us to the conclusion that God's forgiveness is unconditional, a pardon of an offense without repayment of any sort, by us or Jesus ever. The Greek word for forgiveness, *aphesis*, means to let go or to dismiss, to set free or to acquit or remit, so that the concept and act of forgiving is

the relinquishing of any legitimate reason for complaint, letting go of any offense and the right to demand retribution.” (p. 108)

This model of forgiveness is seen in the parable of the Prodigal Son. The father forgives the son of all past sins and never even demands any form of repayment. He relinquishes his right to expect this in exchange for a reconciliation of the relationship between him and his son.

Christ did not pay for our sins, Jesus erased our sins and its debt on the cross through divine forgiveness. In so doing, Jesus has removed any barrier between God and us so that reconciliation and restoration of our position as children of God may be redeemed. It is an expression of divine love that we see modeled in this beloved parable through the actions of the father.

This is the Good News that the disciples experienced as they encountered the embodiment of God’s forgiveness in the risen Christ. It is the extraordinary parental love that John expresses in this morning’s reading and it is the love of God we seek to live out still today in our world.

While the world seeks to use violence and domination to control and subjugate one another through the economy of violence we are called to a different economic system found in Christ. The economy of unconditional love, forgiveness and grace extended to all in the hope of restorative justice, peace and reconciliation.

Let us take hold of the wounded hands of forgiveness extended to the world through the risen Christ. May we continue on the work of redemption by being living testimonies embodying God’s love and living in God’s new economy of forgiveness.

ⁱ Source: Reported in Roland Bainton, Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther. As printed on www.storiesforpreaching.com.au.

ⁱⁱ Executing God: Rethinking Everything You’ve Been Taught about Salvation and the Cross. By Sharon L. Baker. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville KY. 2013. P108-109.