

Grace Lutheran Church
40 N. Main St., Hatfield, PA 19440
215-855-4676 + gracelutheranhatfield.org

17th Sunday after Pentecost, September 19, 2021
"The Dangerous Weapon of Forgiveness" (James 3:3-4:3, 7-8a)

By Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

The Apostles' Creed has been called "the Christian's pledge of allegiance." Maybe you noticed that we have brought it back into our worship. Like our nation's pledge many of us know it by heart, so I am going to challenge you to say part of the third article with me. "I believe in the Holy Spirit...the holy catholic church [catholic meaning 'universal']...the communion of saints...the forgiveness of sins...."

There it is. That's what I want to focus on today. Do you?? Do you believe in the forgiveness of sins? And not just the idea of it, but in a way that becomes who you are?

Along with loving our enemies, forgiveness is one of the hardest things we are called to do as Christians. But today we are talking not about forgiving others but forgiving ourselves. I think a lot what people do to hurt each other comes because, deep down, we don't believe in the forgiveness of sins. We don't believe that God forgives us, no matter we have done or left undone. And if we don't believe God forgives our sins, how can we forgive ourselves for the list of things that just grows longer every day?

Today's second reading from James shines a light onto this. James was writing in the generation after Jesus when early Christians were being corrupted by self-centered Roman values. Last week we heard James speak against gossip, slander and the dangers of the tongue, which he called "a restless evil, full of deadly poison." Today James addresses the sources of conflict, which he says come from "cravings that are at war within you...You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder [figuratively]. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts."

We could throw up our hands and say, "So what else is new? That's just how people are." But every sin, every transgression, everything we do that ends up hurting others, comes from a choice that we have made. The real question is: Why would we make such choices, knowing that we have a God who loves us completely and forgives us infinitely? Where does our need to hurt other people come from?

I think it comes from our inability to accept that God loves and forgives us. God is not judgmental. God shows no partiality. God created each of us in God's own image and is simply waiting with open arms for us to return. But we must remember that the devil is still hard at work. While Christ's victory over death spelled his doom, Satan is still the ruler of this world. And he has hung on this long because he is a master trickster. His greatest deception is to

tempt us into thinking that God does not love us and therefore will not forgive us, so the only way to survive is to look out for our own self-interests at all costs.

But no one can know true humility—no one can commit to being last of all and servant of all, as Jesus calls us to be in today's Gospel—until we are able to believe in God's forgiveness. Because only when we do can we forgive ourselves, and only then do we gain the solid ground that we need to stand on to forgive others—to really forgive, not just say you do and continue to bear the grudge.

And here is what is most shocking: The inability to forgive ourselves plays right into Satan's hands. In fact, the devil thrives off our inability to forgive. His best scenario is for us to think only of ourselves and forget all about what God in Christ accomplished on the cross. Let's take a look at how this plays out in light of a couple of today's passages from James.

James 3:14, having bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart: You blame others for what you don't have, but even more, you blame yourself for not being smarter, or wealthier, or more successful. Because you resent the accomplishments of others, you lie about your own status in a desperate attempt to get ahead. Sooner or later this leads to broken trust and broken relationships. But if you could forgive yourself for not being who you aren't, and embrace all that God has given you, you will find peace.

James 4:1, conflicts and disputes that come from cravings that are at war within you: We want what we do not have, so we take it out on those who have what we want. The perfect house with the white picket fence. The new Maserati. The latest iPhone. So we start little wars. We blow our leaves through the neighbor's picket fence. In heavy traffic we cut off the Maserati which is trying to make a lane change. We ridicule owners of new phones for their constant upgrades and brag about how much better made our old phone is; back then they built them to last.

Or maybe we can't forgive ourselves for not being who we aren't. All we can see is our faults and how we don't measure up. So we take it all out on others. We accuse them of the very things that we cannot forgive ourselves for. In psychological terms, this is classic projection. We see it all the time in the form of bullying. When one person ridicules another, it is almost always the bully projecting their own insecurities onto the other person. But if you could forgive yourself and love yourself as the unique person that God created, you would be able to embrace everything you do have and all that you in fact are with gratitude and thanksgiving. And you will find peace.

How can we open our hearts to receive God's forgiveness? The key lies in those two words at the beginning of the Creed: "I believe." This is what Jesus told the synagogue leader, Jairus, in Mark 5 whose sick daughter had just died: "Do not fear, only believe." His daughter had actually died—yet Jesus told him, "Just believe." He did, and when Jesus got to his house he lifted his daughter off her death-bed, full of new life.

The Syrophenician woman from a few weeks ago whose daughter was gravely ill. The hemorrhaging woman who had become an outcast; the Roman centurion at the cross: They all said "I believe," and just like that, and their lives turned around 180 degrees. The same will be true for you. These two words unlock the door to forgiveness—forgiveness being the most dangerous weapon you can bring to bear against Satan. Believing you are loved and forgiven will shatter the devil's entire arsenal of trickery and open the gates for you to new life in Christ, every day, which flows to you from the God who wants nothing more than to love you fully and completely, just as you are.

Amen.