

Forgiveness

December 6, 2009

Richmond United Church

Second Sunday of Advent

Malachi 3:1-4

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

Philippians 1:3-11

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

Luke 3:1-6

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

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The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

Advent, a period of waiting and preparation, a season of "divine discontent." We wait for the light to break in. For Peace to be felt. In a world of full of noise. With a thousand voices all day long assaulting our ears, we wait in lonely silence. Lighting the candle of Peace we seek that light which restores.

Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack in everything

That's how the light gets in.

L. Cohen

John stands there preaching. Can you see him? Yelling at the crowds to flee from the wrath coming. He is inviting people to prepare by a "baptism of repentance." John is calling for a fundamental change of heart, soul, and mind. It is a call for a radical change in behaviour. John preaches the coming realm of God, and this kingdom of God is the state of forgiveness, where sin is forgiven – wiped away.

We don't often talk about sin, and when we do it is often moralistic. The sin John is speaking about comes in many shapes and sizes. We sin when we refuse our vulnerability, believing we can make it on our own, believing we are self created individuals. This is the feeling we are the masters of the universe, a term that was used for those who controlled Wall Street. Sin is the refusal to enter the dance of life, closing ourselves off, refusing the possibilities God offers to us. We sin when we create idols and then spend immense amounts of energy maintaining them – all the time believing that all our control will really make us safe. We sin when we are not available to the vulnerable face of our brother or sister – and when we fail to share. And, we sin when we refuse the basic relationally of creation – that we are codependent with others and that our well being is intertwined with other's well being.

In the biblical vision, sin defiles the world -- corrupting the image of God in us and, through us, the world as well, so the washing of baptism restores God's image. If sin obscures God's light in the world, then washing away sin and its effects makes for brightness – a light that may illuminate God's way into the world.

Sin is never just individual. It takes up residence in systems of oppression. It is propagated by lies. It thrives on structures of injustice that would "deface" all in its wake. It invites us to refuse to see the human face of those who are different from us. Sin offers rationalizations for our self-serving ways. It builds walls between "us" and "them" that rupture the relational web of life and preventing us from seeing that "their" vulnerability and suffering are our very own. This day, this December 6, which is the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women in Canada, reminds us of how negativity takes up residence in how we think about one another.

Preparing for the coming of God's realm means washing the lens of our willing self deceit. It is a disciplined practice of seeing through our rationalizations to the heart of evil –a practice that needs a community of discernment to remain honest. Paul prays that the love the Philippine community has already begun to share, might "overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best."

Sin is not only something we do, it is also something we suffer. We know that countless numbers –perhaps even we ourselves – are victims of sin. How do those who suffer from sin prepare for the coming of God's realm? How do we live a life style of peace? How do we remember Dec 6th?

Peace is forgiveness that opens our heart to others. It is to understand that forgiveness is a gift from God. We do not earn it. Nor does God demand payment for sin. For salvation is a gift of grace that human beings do nothing to deserve. Because of that forgiveness we can see that what we do – individually and in community – does indeed matter. Now we can respond with our eyes wide open.

We might refuse to believe lies – lies that deny us of our full humanity – lies that have taught us self-blame for our suffering – that have denied the image of God in us. Lies that say that our suffering is God's judgment. We might seek wisdom in discerning what is from God and what is evil? And, we might take heart from Isaiah's prophecy that mountains be made low and valleys be raised means that the structures of evil and oppression are not the way things are, nor should be.

This vision of forgiveness tells us about the God Jesus preached. God is one who needs us, is in partnership with us. The power of God is to seek justice and uses persuasive power of love to achieve it. This God is not hierarchical, top down power. God is relational, participates in intimacy with us, and is moved by the world - feels our pain and joy The nature of this God is forgiveness and forgiveness is the way that sets us free, to get on with life. God is in the forgiveness business.

This forgiveness creates the inner change we need so we can support one another. Being forgiven we will the well-being of an offender instead of having ill-will to the other. Forgiveness is something we discover and rediscover, it is a process not a product. In the process of forgiveness we discover ourselves in the those who injure. We as injured, in many way, are like those who injure.

This does not mean forgetting hurt and harm. We respond to hurt in such a way it that it moves the world to peace rather than violence. It takes time. It requires an acknowledgment of real hurt and harm. It requires

that we take time to know the source of harm, not only the action but the motives. Forgiveness requires the surrendering to God the right to get even. It is to turn the other over to God.

This is an inner journey that has social implications. As those who first know themselves as forgiven, we are now competent to forgive others. It creates systems of justice with mercy.

The internal has external implications. When our pain is heard, we are more likely to hear the pain of the other. So forgiveness is found in the double activity of confrontation and care; confronting the offender with the offence, and caring for the offender. That care means justice with compassion, not vengeance and restitution. With care and confrontation forgiveness results in the restoration of mutual relationship.

Of course, we are not alone in preparing the way. There is the promise that God is working to prepare the world for God's coming. God works on shaping and forming human beings to be more humane. It is not a matter of getting "it" right. God offers us a new, untarnished possibility for the next moment.

John comes to point the way. Pay attention. Something new is coming. Practice repentance. Make straight the way. Watch for the promise to be fulfilled.

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