

March 22, 2020
Online worship
Leviticus 16: 20-22; John 7:53-8:11
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
Mary E. Baard

Walking Humbly: Sin to Forgiveness

CHILDREN'S MOMENT

Book: *Big Red Lollipop* by Rukhsana Khan

Summary from www.storypath.upsem.edu
Rubina is the oldest sister of a household with three girls. She gets invited to her first birthday party, but she is not allowed to go unless she agrees to take her younger sister, Sana. Begrudgingly, Rubina takes Sana to the party, and it's a nightmare. Sana must win all the games or she whines and complains. At the end of the party, each girl gets her own goody bag with a big red lollipop inside. Rubina can't wait to eat her lollipop, only to find that Sana has already eaten it. She's so upset, but the worst of all is that Rubina doesn't get invited to any more parties. Until one day, Sana comes home with her first birthday party invitation. Now the youngest sister is old enough to beg to go along. Their mother, Ami, tells Sana she can't go unless she takes Maryam with her. As Sana is begging and pleading with her mother not to take her little sister along, Rubina interrupts and pleads on Sana's behalf. Sana is allowed to go to the party without her little sister. When Sana gets home, she shares her green lollipop with Rubina and after that the sisters are friends.

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

We're in a series where we have been looking at the arc of the biblical story - from

creation to the early church. We're considering the tension between the good creation and the oftentimes brokenness of human community, so that we find ourselves crying, *God help us*.

We've been reflecting on God's saving work recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the life of Jesus. Two weeks ago we remembered that God works to set people free from bondage and calls us also to do justice. Last week we saw how God draws people home when they find themselves in exile and calls us also to love kindness. Today we look at how God offers us forgiveness in the midst of sin and calls us to walk humbly in the Way of Jesus.

Again today we have two readings: one from the Hebrew Scriptures and one from the life of Jesus. The Old Testament reading is from Leviticus, which in early rabbinic tradition was called the Priest's Manual. The reading describes a symbolic way in which the people relieved themselves of their sins. It is from this story that we get the word scapegoat, when we try to make someone else responsible for what we have done wrong.

In the story from the life of Jesus we will hear him point out to people that no one is blameless. We should work on our own problems rather than focusing on someone else's.

SERMON

We can resist anything - but temptation. A couple of weeks ago, the story of Adam and Eve reminded us that we often do what **we** want and then when asked about it tend to blame someone else for it.

Sometimes we do the thing we know we should not do – like eat our sister’s lollipop. Sometimes we do not do the thing we know we should – like say we’re sorry for eating our sister’s lollipop. Through the ages, the word the church has used to describe this problem is sin. The word sin actually comes from an archery term which means to miss the mark.

We try to stay tuned in to God. We want to follow in the Way of Jesus, but sometimes we miss the mark. *God help us. God forgive us.* The very good news is that indeed God does forgive us, opening the way to a new and renewed life, so we can walk humbly with God in the Way of Jesus.

*Forgiveness is now.
Freed from the bondage of sin,
we’re at home with God.*

Forgiveness is not about forgetting. It is not about excusing what has happened. Forgiveness is about not staying stuck in the pain of what has happened. It may or may not mean you stay in relationship with the other person. It does mean that you are open to a new future.

Our scripture readings describe some of the ways the church has thought about sin and forgiveness in the past.

A long, long time ago, before Jesus was born, when the book of Leviticus was written, the priest was the religious leader in the Jewish community. The priest offered sacrifices in the temple to enact forgiveness for the people. (This is not something we do today.) At the high holy day of Passover a lamb was sacrificed. This was still happening at the time of Jesus.

Some of us grew up being told that *Jesus died for our sins*. Well, it’s not surprising that the early followers of Jesus, who were Jews, saw Jesus as symbolically being the lamb of God, a sacrifice once and for all. However, it is not in the crucifixion that we see God’s saving work of forgiveness. It is in the resurrection. In the resurrection God opens up a new life – a new future and invites us to walk humbly in the Way of Jesus.

In the story in John’s gospel, the people are taunting the woman who is involved with a man she has not publicly committed her life to and are threatening to throw stones at her. Jesus – very cleverly – says people should look at their own problems first. *Let the one without sin cast the first stone.* They all walk away.

When I was a child, when someone teased us, we were taught to say,
*Sticks and stones may break my bones,
but words can never hurt me.*

That’s not really true. Sticks and stones do hurt, but so do words.

With all of us spending more time at home together, I hope you are having some fun. But you may also be getting on each other’s nerves – a little bit?, sometimes? This is a time for us to be particularly careful about our words – because they do hurt.

It's a time to practice saying *I'm sorry*. It's a time to practice forgiving each other and forgiving yourself. It's a time to walk humbly with God.

Our grandson, Caleb, is three and a half. He sometimes is frustrated when he's trying to find the right word or when he feels there are too many grown up words coming at him. At those times, his volume can get louder. We remind him that yelling doesn't help. Then sometimes I suggest a kissing party. Often, he grins and then I give him kisses and giggles and it helps to change the dynamic. In fact, he often asks for more. I wonder what works in your family.

In the Mr. Rogers film that came out last year, Mr. Rogers is doing a show on forgiveness. He begins his show asking

*Do you know what forgiveness is? ...
It is the decision we make to release a
person from the feelings of anger
we have against them.*

Forgiveness itself is not a feeling. It is a decision. A spiritual commitment to not be in bondage to our own feelings of anger.

These last three weeks we have been exploring the ways of God's salvation.
Freeing us from bondage.
Welcoming us home from exile.
Forgiving us from sin.

Sin can hold us in bondage. It can exile us from ourselves and one another and God. Forgiveness sets us free and welcomes us home.

*Forgiveness is now.
Freed from the bondage of sin,
we're at home with God.*

Over these weeks I have connected these themes to our church covenant, so it seems appropriate today to end this sermon with us all saying the church covenant together.

FIRST PARISH CHURCH COVENANT

**In the presence of God and each other,
*We promise to do justice;***

**Following in the way of Jesus,
we seek to act on our deep respect
for the sacredness of each individual
and of all creation.**

We promise to love kindness;

**Inspired by the Spirit,
we vow to forgive often,
and to sustain one another
through life's challenges, joys,
and sorrows.**

We promise to walk humbly with God;

**Through worship, prayer, and service,
we journey together
with the Living God
whose power is revealed—
and yet to be revealed—
in each of us and in all of us.**

God be with you.