

THE REIGN OF GOD 5: FORGIVENESS

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Isaiah 43: 18-25 - God is about to do a new thing
Mark 2: 1-12 - Jesus heals a paralytic

Stories of the Exile are stories of the darkest moments in Israel's history when all that they had cherished--their homeland, their temple--had been taken away by the Babylonians. The people had been taken into exile and seemingly had lost everything, and in the midst of that exile time, this prophet came to the people and spoke a word from God that told the people a brand new thing was about to happen. With the exile and return we have one of the universal foundational stories that serves as a model of our faith. And that moment, the return, is exciting.

It's a celebrative moment when we experience in our lives some kind of restoration of the goodness of life. But isn't that a precious, amazing, moment when God's word comes--when, from the midst of the hopelessness of the exile moments in our lives, we hear God telling us in our hearts or through a loved one or in whatever way, that things aren't always going to be the way they have always been? God is telling us that a new thing is going to happen, and that all we have got stuck in is going to be forgiven, is going to be forgotten. There's a turning moment, an opportunity in our lives, and it's an opportunity that we had given up hope on and thought would never happen. So here's this marvellous word through Isaiah to the people in the Exile--word of a newness from God.

We then have the story in the Gospel following Jesus' declaration that the Reign of God is near. Jesus illustrates the story with symbolic actions, one of which relates to the paralytic. As in last Sunday's story of the leper, there's no mention of "healing." Last week it was "cleansing"; today, with the paralytic, it is just "Your sins are forgiven." Of course, the scribes start to argue with Jesus, questioning his authority--"Only God can forgive sins." Jesus responds by asking whether it's easier to say "your sins are forgiven" or "get up and walk home." And so he proceeds to demonstrate with the words "get up, take your bed, go home." And so the man does.

We're dealing with the question of sin and forgiveness. It's not about healing. It's about sin and forgiveness, and that is a set of ideas with which we tend to have a little bit of trouble. However, we got some insights into the reason for that trouble in the last couple of sessions of our study of Marcus Borg's *The Heart of Christianity*. And one of the hints is in today's story from Mark. It was a paralytic. The man was paralysed, which means he had a lack of feeling, a lack of mobility. It's a strange image--this hole in the roof, lowering the bed, and the crowd all around. With these strange stories in the Gospel I like to move to an interpretation, a method of interpretation that is based on dream-work--treating the story as if it were a dream, and applying some of the principles and questions that go into dream-work. One of the methods is to take each of the components and characters in the story and ask myself how that reflects a part of me. So we look at this story and think, well, what part of us is paralyzed, has lost mobility, lost feeling. What does that symbolize in us? So we have, in a way, a metaphor for sin. We think of sin too narrowly when we think of it just as wrong-doing or breaking the rules.

We have a broader sense of the meaning of sin if we think of it as anything that paralyzes us, anything that stops us and blocks us in our lives, anything that shuts down the feeling in our lives.

Expanding our understanding of sin, we turn to the chapter from Marcus Borg's book that we studied a couple of weeks ago. Although I'm now referring to Tim Scorer's study guide for the book, he's talking about Borg when he speaks of the closed heart. Sin in a way occurs when our hearts close, or harden, because we then shut out God and of course we shut out everyone else. We all know that experience of the closed heart and the open heart, but Borg gives this marvellous list (and you can add your own experiences of the closed heart, of spiritual paralysis). Borg says these are the things that can happen when our hearts are closed:

We do not see clearly, nor hear.
We lack understanding and have a darkened mind.
We are in bondage to the desiring of our own hearts.
We lack gratitude.
We are insensitive to wonder and awe.
We forget God and lose track of mystery.
We are separated from a larger reality.
We lack compassion and do not feel the suffering of others.
We are insensitive to injustice.

I'm sure we recognize these things--some in ourselves, some in others, some in the world around us. Borg then goes on to describe some examples from his own personal experience when he knows his heart is closed. I like these.

I stand in a supermarket checkout line and all the people look kind of ugly.
I feel grumpy or self-preoccupied.
The world looks ordinary.
The critical voice is strong in my head.¹

In our study of Borg's book everyone made his or her own list. I'm sure all of you can add to Borg's list for yourselves, recognizing how you experience those times when the heart is closed.

The Sunday school is studying the story of Zacchaeus, and I think Zacchaeus is another good example of someone whose heart had hardened and closed. We can imagine, maybe even speculate a little bit, what Zacchaeus's story might have been, what sort of a novel or a motion picture drama one might write to follow Zacchaeus through his life up to that point where he was stuck the way he was when Jesus met him. Whatever had happened in his life to bring him to the place where he became this hard-hearted, nasty tax collector that everybody hated, he was stuck in it in some way. But the story says he heard Jesus was in town, so he climbed that tree in order to see him. Jesus sensed that Zacchaeus was not only stuck or trapped in whatever his life had led to; he was also longing to break out.

We experience those inner voices in us when we think about the ways in which we're stuck. Perhaps we want to reach out to our loved ones more deeply but can't. Or perhaps we wish we could let go and respond with simple joy to the wonder of life, and yet that seems to have dried up within us. We have voices within us that say "Oh! You

¹ Tim Scorer, *Experiencing the Heart of Christianity* (2005, Wood Lake Books), p. 111.

can't do that," "You're past that," or "That wouldn't work." And this takes us back to the story from Mark if we think of it as a dream, because the scribes are that voice. They are the voice that says "You can't do that; only God can forgive sins." "This can't happen." "This won't work." And so, if we were interpreting that as a dream that we ourselves had, we would also ask ourselves what part of us is represented by the voices of the scribes--by those voices that keep us stuck and locked up.

Those inner voices are the invisible powers that get talked about in the New Testament in so many different ways. They're not real in the sense that they're some material thing. But those inner voices that keep our energy blocked from moving in the way it longs to move--from places where we feel stuck--are real in the sense that they have a spiritual power over us. And so when Jesus talked about the Reign of God, the nearness of the Reign of God, he was talking about the power of the Divine that is close, that is near--a power which can pre-empt the power of those inner voices that keep us locked up.

When Jesus talked about the Reign of God--also known as the Kingdom of God--and talked about how near it was, the next thing he said was "repent and believe." And so that leads us into repentance and forgiveness. Repentance is the ground for forgiveness. That was two lessons ago in our study of Borg. This last week we talked about forgiveness and how most of us need a broader understanding of God's grace than just forgiveness itself. We have narrowed in on this sense that sins need to be forgiven, and many people feel what they really need is not forgiveness of sins but rather some kind of liberation. They feel stuck and need to be set free. That's different from feeling guilty about everything we have done wrong, and needing forgiveness. Or maybe we feel like we can't see what's going on around us, that we feel blind and in need of sight or light. Or we just feel lost in our lives and in need of guidance and direction.

Borg suggests that we expand our understanding of sin and grace or salvation so that it goes beyond forgiveness to all the different ways in which grace acts in our lives. I took a look at the Greek word for "forgiveness" in order to look more deeply into its meaning. Interestingly, it's the same word that occurs in that verse about letting the children come to Jesus and not stopping them. Let them come, permit them, allow them. The word "forgive," the word that translates as "forgive," is the same word and has that sense of allowing or releasing or permitting. And I got the sense that what we call "sin," whatever it is that paralyzes us, is a kind of energy that gets stuck; and that what is called "forgiveness" is just the releasing of that energy so it can complete its course and disappear. In other words, there's a flow of energy.

I remember a story from a long time ago. I probably told it to you before, but don't stop me if you've already heard it because I want to tell it again. The story illustrates what is in the Isaiah passage that talks about "forgetting" sin, not "forgiving" sin. "I'll forget your sins, just forget them as though they weren't ever there." The story is about a little girl who had an amazing connection with God. She was acting like a prophet, really, and declaring things on behalf of God. This happened within an environment where the church was quite conservative, and the people became very anxious about having this out-of-control little person talking on behalf of God. The bishop decided he'd better see if could put a stop to this, so he examined her, questioned her, trying to find a way to trap her. He said "You talk to God, do you?" "Yes." "God talks to you?" "Yes." "Well, I'll tell you what. When you talk to God tomorrow, ask Him what I confessed in my confessions today because I say my confessions to God every day." She said,

“Okay.” So the next day they got together and the bishop asked “Did you talk to God?” “Yes.” “Did you ask him what I confessed?” “Yes, I did.” “And what did He say?” “He said he forgot.” That little girl knew much more about forgiveness than the bishop did. It’s that “letting go.” It’s that “forgetting.”

I find myself wanting to ask if you know those parts in your lives where you’re stuck, and which you just don’t seem to be able to get beyond. Does it make any difference whether you call it “sin,” or “paralysis,” or whatever else, especially in relation to those voices that say “Oh! You can’t let that go,” or “You can’t get past that”? Does it make any difference to know that God forgot about it long ago? Here’s the next part of that lesson from Borg where he talks a little bit about when our hearts are open.

We see more clearly.

We move from darkness into light.

We are alive to wonder.

We feel profound gratitude.

We feel the suffering and pain of the world and respond to it.

We are compassionate as God is compassionate.²

I’ll share with you part of one of the conversations we had in our study of Borg. One of the members of the group talked about feeling the pain of the world. From that part of the conversation we realized that the open-hearted way of life is not always the easy way. Sometimes it’s a more painful way of life. The closed heart is the way to paralyze ourselves so we don’t feel the pain around us. Part of the open heart is feeling the pain as well as the joy and wonder. But with the pain and the joy and feeling it all, through it all, the difference is simply that with the open heart we are alive. That’s the grace; we are alive. And it’s near, going back to Jesus’ original statement that the Reign of God is near. It doesn’t say it’s already here, it has arrived, it’s all set up. And it doesn’t say, well, it’s scheduled for 15 years from now. It says it’s near, it’s close.

Borg talks about that as the “thin places”--the sense in which that grace, that sacred presence, that forgiveness, that release, is right there. It’s so close. It’s all around us, and if we don’t see it it’s because the eyes of our souls are not open. How we come to see it, how we catch the glimpses, is what Borg calls the “thin places,” the thin places in the veil that separates us from the sacred presence that is all around us. And then Borg invites us to start into thinking, to name the thin places in our lives. Many of them are in worship; they are moments in worship. Maybe we could say the primary purpose of worship is to come to the thin places where we sense that grace, that forgiveness, that life-giving power of the presence of the sacred.

But there are many other places in life, in our relationships, in nature, and so on. They are the thin places where, suddenly, what we thought we were so stuck in, just dissolves. It’s not that anything changes. It’s not that we have to change somebody else or go back and redo something we did. It just dissolves and we’re able to move on, like the paralytic who couldn’t feel and couldn’t move but all of a sudden could stand, pick up his bed, and go home. It is in those thin places where we receive the Spirit, where we receive the sacred into our lives. And whatever it is that has us stuck or paralyzed in our lives simply dissolves.

Transcribed and edited for publication by Sue and By Reesor

² Ibid., p. 115.