

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

*You are Loved... You are Forgiven...
On Being at Peace
Isaiah 55.1-9; Luke 13.1-9
Russ Dean, March 7. 20-10*



We say it every week. And some of you have told us it's all you need to hear: "You are loved. You are forgiven. Be at peace."¹ I don't know where these words came from. They are not part of the Presbyterian Book of Common Worship, which is essentially the source of our current worship structure, having been patterned by Dr. Donald Mitchell in his year as your interim pastor, now a full decade ago.² The moment of confession may be part of that liturgy, but our ritualized offer of love and forgiveness is not. Sometime within the first few months of becoming your pastors, we hit upon these words as an "Assurance of Pardon," and they struck a chord. They have been indispensable in our Baptist "liturgy" ever since.

There is a certain power in those three simple sentences. Grammatically speaking, two are indicative statements – theological affirmations we simply claim (You are loved... You are forgiven...). The third is a grammatical imperative, offered in hope (Be at peace). I have encouraged our staff to speak those indicative words in the "second person," (You are loved, rather than We are loved ...) believing it is also needful to hear these words, directed to us... pronounced upon us... Spoken in this way, these two statements are not unlike a priest's absolution. None of your ministers claims to have (nor to want) priestly power. We do claim the insight of Jesus' words to his disciples, "When you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven... when you retain their sins, they are retained..." So, "We are forgiven," is a different statement all together than, "You are forgiven..."³

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³ Various other associate ministers have tended to say, "We are..." In addressing my concern with our staff I was made aware that they were more comfortable suggesting those more inclusive words.

In the course of our lives we need not just affirm a belief in the truth of forgiveness; we need to actually experience being forgiven. If someone has hurt you, and musters the courage to ask forgiveness, what that person needs is not for you to say to, “Thank you for apologizing. Yes, we are forgiven.” Well, that’s a nice thought – but it is not what is needed in that moment. The person aching for forgiveness does not need a general affirmation, we’re all forgiven. . . No, the person needs to be told, preferably having had his or her name called, “Mary... Terry... Gail... Eric... Russ... you are forgiven.” So we speak those words every week. Most often in the second person, plural... “You are loved. You are forgiven.”

But recently I found myself asking if this is what we should be saying. There is no doubt that the first statement is accurate. You are loved. For you are! “God is love” is an affirmation for the Christian Church which goes without saying. Still, we need to be reminded – and need to be reminded that God’s unconditional love is love... well... without conditions! No matter who you are... no matter what confession you just brought into that moment of silence... no matter... No. Matter. You Are Loved. I hope it can be said of the people of this community of faith – no matter what or who you are... you are loved, by us. I do hope. But God’s unceasing love is bedrock truth for the Church. We need to speak this good news more often than we do – *Shout it from the rooftops*, as the scripture says! (Matthew 10.27)

But when we say, in tandem with that first affirmation “You are forgiven,” what does that mean? The question is just this: can you be forgiven if you’ve not asked for forgiveness? Can you really know forgiveness without having said, “I’m sorry”? Should we pronounce that powerful indicative: You are... if we don’t know if you’ve practiced the equally powerful act of repentance? Maybe we should say, “You are loved. And if you repented, you are forgiven”! (But that just doesn’t seem to have the same power.)

I’m actually quite comfortable pronouncing this blanket forgiveness. Too much else in this life is conditional: If I’m smart enough... if I’m good enough... if I’m rich enough... if I work hard enough... if I’m not overweight... if I pass the test.... if... if... if... This world knows so little forgiveness there’s no danger we’ll throw the balance to the other side by offering free forgiveness this one moment a week. Perhaps doing so helps to reinforce the affirmation of faith that so strongly undergirds such a universal

declaration. You are loved – because *God is love* (1 John 4.16). And you are forgiven – because God forgives (Psalm 103.12 among many other references). Period. That’s the theology. I stand by it.

But the practicality of it, may be different... altogether.

What is forgiveness with no repentance? Well, it’s a word. It’s only a word.⁴

And as important as it is to speak words, to give people the vocabulary of forgiveness, in terms of our actual living, the reality of our experience, there is no forgiveness without repentance. I can hear some of you right now – you might as well be thinking out loud! “I don’t like that word... repent.” You know, it’s just a little too... churchy. Too... preachy. Not quite... sophisticated enough for us! Maybe it reminds you of revivals you once attended, or radio preachers you occasionally hear, spewing their angry good news. And I do understand. Poor theology is poor theology. And repentance has too often been demanded from the other side of a pulpit that knew too little grace. The word has too often been delivered uncharitably. Has too often been the handmaid of guilt and fear, and offered as the only way to God’s approval and as the only currency by which to purchase that one-way ticket to heaven. I understand bad theology – and I hate that preaching is too often needed to right theological wrongs, some of which have been around about as long as there have been preachers mis-communicating them.⁵

But repent, we must. Choose some more sophisticated name if you like. Use the language of psychology or the latest fad in therapy if you must. But there’s just no way around saying “I’m sorry” if you want to be in healthy relationships. In her book, *Talking about Genesis*, Cynthia Ozick says,

Self-knowledge truthfully confronted (or call it historical honesty) is the only way reconciliation can supplant murderousness. Without self-knowledge – a thing (even) deeper than repentance – forgiveness, whether given or received, remains a hollow act.⁶

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Or, in the simpler words of St. Augustine: “Before God can deliver us, we must undeceive ourselves.”⁷ So when the prophets and the gospel writers and Jesus cried, “*Repent... or perish,*” they were not speaking as angry evangelists, fearful and motivated by bad theology, they were speaking plain truth. If you want to move ahead, you must acknowledge where you have been, what or whom you have left behind, and what relationships have been broken, in your wake.

Yes, poor theology is everywhere. Jesus confronted it in today’s story. I heard the very same theology this week (I hear it every week), but this week, it was in a radio interview with the heart-broken father of a daughter, recently killed in one of our wars. A helicopter pilot, his daughter’s bird of war went down in a fiery crash that took the life of a beautiful, faithful, committed young soldier. But the father gave thanks for God’s grace to his son-in-law, who, he explained, had once been stationed with his wife. Also a helicopter pilot, his marching orders had not long ago sent him on a different assignment. So God saw fit, the father praised, to move the son-in-law so he would not have to witness his wife’s tragic demise. Thanks be to God (?).

I find it tragic that so many people believe God is behind the scenes, manipulating every pieces of our lives – even ending our lives, at just a command. In the case of this father’s belief, if we’re faithful, or lucky (who knows which), even moving us so we don’t have to be there to see our wife meet her maker. In his commentary on this passage, William Loader says, “Even very traditional, respectable and respectful citizens come to the point where they have to recognize bastardry for what it is and stop attributing everything to God.”⁸

It was to ask of this same capricious, manipulative God, that unnamed questioners sought Jesus. Neither of the events in this text is mentioned in any other ancient writing, but there is no reason to believe they are not true. Pilate was ruthless, slaughtering thousands during his reign of

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But...

Now here’s where it gets difficult, because with that little word, we’re tempted to reverse course and once again affirm the poor theology Jesus has just refuted. It’s easy to read this passage and overlook that all-important “No.” It’s easy to assume that what Jesus was really saying is those who perished did so as the judgment of God—and in the same manner (the judgment of God) we may all perish with them. But Jesus says “No!” Were the Galileans who died at Pilate’s hand worse sinners than others? No! Did those Jews who were killed in the tragedy in Jerusalem in some way deserve what they got? No!

No. No. No... But... *Unless you repent. You will die, too!*

It’s a strange way to convey this theological message – which actually is good news if we can hear it – but Jesus is just saying this is the fact of the matter. The message is simple: the time to repent is now. It is urgent. No one is promised tomorrow. They died. We might die, too. What would you leave unfinished if today were your last? It may be. And the reason to repent is practical. Not doing so means death. Not physical death, necessarily. And not God’s judgment to eternal death, heaven and hell stuff (though Jesus’ words may not preclude those implications). The point is just that if life is made of our

relationships – and it is – and if no relationship can survive without the honesty of saying “I’m sorry,” and without a corresponding forgiveness – and relationships cannot – Jesus’ message is just a stark reminder of how vitally important it is to be able to look at our self in the mirror and to fully recognize who it is that is looking back at us.

Unless you repent. You will die, too. The innocence of your childlike heart will die, suffocating in deceptions and lies, anger and jealousy. Individuals need to repent. I don’t need to tell you where in your life. Take a look in the mirror. Communities need to repent. Nations need to repent. Read the paper if you want a few examples... We’ve made poverty a virtual crime in this country, and hypocrisy a kind of moral value. 5,000 of Charlotte’s residents had no bed to call their own last night. We concentrate the poor in small communities that devolve, understandably so, probably inevitably so, in a spiral of hopelessness and helplessness and crime and violence and despair. The concentration of poverty virtually ensures that the cycle will continue – but we don’t want that kind of people in our back yard. (Unless, of course, they’re cutting our grass or cleaning out the septic tank.)⁹ We need to repent. We’re still building jails in this country at a grace-less, God-less pace, because we’re still not willing to ask why it is that any moral country could ever get to the point that it really needed to incarcerate more than one percent of its total population.¹⁰ We need to repent.

You do not need to believe we are judged for our sins to understand the urgency and necessity of repentance. I do not. This is what unconditional love means. This is why God says, “*My thoughts are not your (judgmental) thoughts... my ways are not your (un-forgiving) ways...*” We need not believe God stands apart from us and judges our every action – and get wrapped up in the poor theology that comes with such a judgmental view. God is the patient gardener: “Maybe we’ll cut it down next year.” But it is

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simply undeniable that we are judged by our sins.¹¹ You probably need not look beyond the confines of your own home to know this is true. Karl Barth once said, “Sin is the only empirically verifiable Christian doctrine.” In your office... your church... your city... your nation... in your home... in your heart. We need to repent.

Repentance, however, does not necessarily involve breast beating, a woe-is-me-wretched-sinner-that-I-am, contrition. This may, in fact, deter us from real repentance – which is movement. Forward. As the prominent 19th century Congregationalist minister, Henry Ward Beecher has said, “Repentance is another name for aspiration.”¹²

We offer a moment of confession every week. About one minute to reflect on your life. But real repentance does not occur in that moment. Nor does the forgiveness we speak. Repentance and forgiveness are worked out in the hard-knocks practice of human interaction. True repentance will occur only as we aspire to make life better than it has been – and as we take some step to move “forward” in our homes and schools and work places. Which brings us to the third of the sentences we speak each week. It’s the imperative, a demand, a command – but it’s an imperative that can only come when repentance has been spoken freely.

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May it be so!

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We say it every week. And some of you have told us it's all you need to hear: "You are loved. You are forgiven. Be at peace."¹ I don't know where these words came from. They are not part of the Presbyterian Book of Common Worship, which is essentially the source of our current worship structure, having been patterned by Dr. Donald Mitchell in his year as your interim pastor, now a full decade ago.² The moment of confession may be part of that liturgy, but our ritualized offer of love and forgiveness is not. Sometime within the first few months of becoming your pastors, we hit upon these words as an "Assurance of Pardon," and they struck a chord. They have been indispensable in our Baptist "liturgy" ever since.

There is a certain power in those three simple sentences. Grammatically speaking, two are indicative statements – theological affirmations we simply claim (You are loved... You are forgiven...). The third is a grammatical imperative, offered in hope (Be at peace). I have encouraged our staff to speak those indicative words in the "second person," (You are loved, rather than We are loved ...) believing it is also needful to hear these words, directed to us... pronounced upon us... Spoken in this way, these two statements are not unlike a priest's absolution. None of your ministers claims to have (nor to want) priestly power. We do claim the insight of Jesus' words to his disciples, "When you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven... when you retain their sins, they are retained..." So, "We are forgiven," is a different statement all together than, "You are forgiven..."³

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³ Various other associate ministers have tended to say, "We are..." In addressing my concern with our staff I was made aware that they were more comfortable suggesting those more inclusive words.

In the course of our lives we need not just affirm a belief in the truth of forgiveness; we need to actually experience being forgiven. If someone has hurt you, and musters the courage to ask forgiveness, what that person needs is not for you to say to, “Thank you for apologizing. Yes, we are forgiven.” Well, that’s a nice thought – but it is not what is needed in that moment. The person aching for forgiveness does not need a general affirmation, we’re all forgiven. . . No, the person needs to be told, preferably having had his or her name called, “Mary... Terry... Gail... Eric... Russ... you are forgiven.” So we speak those words every week. Most often in the second person, plural... “You are loved. You are forgiven.”

But recently I found myself asking if this is what we should be saying. There is no doubt that the first statement is accurate. You are loved. For you are! “God is love” is an affirmation for the Christian Church which goes without saying. Still, we need to be reminded – and need to be reminded that God’s unconditional love is love... well... without conditions! No matter who you are... no matter what confession you just brought into that moment of silence... no matter... No. Matter. You Are Loved. I hope it can be said of the people of this community of faith – no matter what or who you are... you are loved, by us. I do hope. But God’s unceasing love is bedrock truth for the Church. We need to speak this good news more often than we do – *Shout it from the rooftops*, as the scripture says! (Matthew 10.27)

But when we say, in tandem with that first affirmation “You are forgiven,” what does that mean? The question is just this: can you be forgiven if you’ve not asked for forgiveness? Can you really know forgiveness without having said, “I’m sorry”? Should we pronounce that powerful indicative: You are... if we don’t know if you’ve practiced the equally powerful act of repentance? Maybe we should say, “You are loved. And if you repented, you are forgiven”! (But that just doesn’t seem to have the same power.)

I’m actually quite comfortable pronouncing this blanket forgiveness. Too much else in this life is conditional: If I’m smart enough... if I’m good enough... if I’m rich enough... if I work hard enough... if I’m not overweight... if I pass the test.... if... if... if... This world knows so little forgiveness there’s no danger we’ll throw the balance to the other side by offering free forgiveness this one moment a week. Perhaps doing so helps to reinforce the affirmation of faith that so strongly undergirds such a universal

declaration. You are loved – because *God is love* (1 John 4.16). And you are forgiven – because God forgives (Psalm 103.12 among many other references). Period. That’s the theology. I stand by it.

But the practicality of it, may be different... altogether.

What is forgiveness with no repentance? Well, it’s a word. It’s only a word.⁴

And as important as it is to speak words, to give people the vocabulary of forgiveness, in terms of our actual living, the reality of our experience, there is no forgiveness without repentance. I can hear some of you right now – you might as well be thinking out loud! “I don’t like that word... repent.” You know, it’s just a little too... churchy. Too... preachy. Not quite... sophisticated enough for us! Maybe it reminds you of revivals you once attended, or radio preachers you occasionally hear, spewing their angry good news. And I do understand. Poor theology is poor theology. And repentance has too often been demanded from the other side of a pulpit that knew too little grace. The word has too often been delivered uncharitably. Has too often been the handmaid of guilt and fear, and offered as the only way to God’s approval and as the only currency by which to purchase that one-way ticket to heaven. I understand bad theology – and I hate that preaching is too often needed to right theological wrongs, some of which have been around about as long as there have been preachers mis-communicating them.⁵

But repent, we must. Choose some more sophisticated name if you like. Use the language of psychology or the latest fad in therapy if you must. But there’s just no way around saying “I’m sorry” if you want to be in healthy relationships. In her book, *Talking about Genesis*, Cynthia Ozick says,

Self-knowledge truthfully confronted (or call it historical honesty) is the only way reconciliation can supplant murderousness. Without self-knowledge – a thing (even) deeper than repentance – forgiveness, whether given or received, remains a hollow act.⁶

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Or, in the simpler words of St. Augustine: “Before God can deliver us, we must undeceive ourselves.”⁷ So when the prophets and the gospel writers and Jesus cried, “*Repent... or perish,*” they were not speaking as angry evangelists, fearful and motivated by bad theology, they were speaking plain truth. If you want to move ahead, you must acknowledge where you have been, what or whom you have left behind, and what relationships have been broken, in your wake.

Yes, poor theology is everywhere. Jesus confronted it in today’s story. I heard the very same theology this week (I hear it every week), but this week, it was in a radio interview with the heart-broken father of a daughter, recently killed in one of our wars. A helicopter pilot, his daughter’s bird of war went down in a fiery crash that took the life of a beautiful, faithful, committed young soldier. But the father gave thanks for God’s grace to his son-in-law, who, he explained, had once been stationed with his wife. Also a helicopter pilot, his marching orders had not long ago sent him on a different assignment. So God saw fit, the father praised, to move the son-in-law so he would not have to witness his wife’s tragic demise. Thanks be to God (?).

I find it tragic that so many people believe God is behind the scenes, manipulating every piece of our lives – even ending our lives, at just a command. In the case of this father’s belief, if we’re faithful, or lucky (who knows which), even moving us so we don’t have to be there to see our wife meet her maker. In his commentary on this passage, William Loader says, “Even very traditional, respectable and respectful citizens come to the point where they have to recognize bastardry for what it is and stop attributing everything to God.”⁸

It was to ask of this same capricious, manipulative God, that unnamed questioners sought Jesus. Neither of the events in this text is mentioned in any other ancient writing, but there is no reason to believe they are not true. Pilate was ruthless, slaughtering thousands during his reign of

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But...

Now here’s where it gets difficult, because with that little word, we’re tempted to reverse course and once again affirm the poor theology Jesus has just refuted. It’s easy to read this passage and overlook that all-important “No.” It’s easy to assume that what Jesus was really saying is those who perished did so as the judgment of God—and in the same manner (the judgment of God) we may all perish with them. But Jesus says “No!” Were the Galileans who died at Pilate’s hand worse sinners than others? No! Did those Jews who were killed in the tragedy in Jerusalem in some way deserve what they got? No!

No. No. No... But... *Unless you repent. You will die, too!*

It’s a strange way to convey this theological message – which actually is good news if we can hear it – but Jesus is just saying this is the fact of the matter. The message is simple: the time to repent is now. It is urgent. No one is promised tomorrow. They died. We might die, too. What would you leave unfinished if today were your last? It may be. And the reason to repent is practical. Not doing so means death. Not physical death, necessarily. And not God’s judgment to eternal death, heaven and hell stuff (though Jesus’ words may not preclude those implications). The point is just that if life is made of our

relationships – and it is – and if no relationship can survive without the honesty of saying “I’m sorry,” and without a corresponding forgiveness – and relationships cannot – Jesus’ message is just a stark reminder of how vitally important it is to be able to look at our self in the mirror and to fully recognize who it is that is looking back at us.

Unless you repent. You will die, too. The innocence of your childlike heart will die, suffocating in deceptions and lies, anger and jealousy. Individuals need to repent. I don’t need to tell you where in your life. Take a look in the mirror. Communities need to repent. Nations need to repent. Read the paper if you want a few examples... We’ve made poverty a virtual crime in this country, and hypocrisy a kind of moral value. 5,000 of Charlotte’s residents had no bed to call their own last night. We concentrate the poor in small communities that devolve, understandably so, probably inevitably so, in a spiral of hopelessness and helplessness and crime and violence and despair. The concentration of poverty virtually ensures that the cycle will continue – but we don’t want that kind of people in our back yard. (Unless, of course, they’re cutting our grass or cleaning out the septic tank.)⁹ We need to repent. We’re still building jails in this country at a grace-less, God-less pace, because we’re still not willing to ask why it is that any moral country could ever get to the point that it really needed to incarcerate more than one percent of its total population.¹⁰ We need to repent.

You do not need to believe we are judged for our sins to understand the urgency and necessity of repentance. I do not. This is what unconditional love means. This is why God says, “*My thoughts are not your (judgmental) thoughts... my ways are not your (un-forgiving) ways...*” We need not believe God stands apart from us and judges our every action – and get wrapped up in the poor theology that comes with such a judgmental view. God is the patient gardener: “Maybe we’ll cut it down next year.” But it is

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simply undeniable that we are judged by our sins.¹¹ You probably need not look beyond the confines of your own home to know this is true. Karl Barth once said, “Sin is the only empirically verifiable Christian doctrine.” In your office... your church... your city... your nation... in your home... in your heart. We need to repent.

Repentance, however, does not necessarily involve breast beating, a woe-is-me-wretched-sinner-that-I-am, contrition. This may, in fact, deter us from real repentance – which is movement. Forward. As the prominent 19th century Congregationalist minister, Henry Ward Beecher has said, “Repentance is another name for aspiration.”¹²

We offer a moment of confession every week. About one minute to reflect on your life. But real repentance does not occur in that moment. Nor does the forgiveness we speak. Repentance and forgiveness are worked out in the hard-knocks practice of human interaction. True repentance will occur only as we aspire to make life better than it has been – and as we take some step to move “forward” in our homes and schools and work places. Which brings us to the third of the sentences we speak each week. It’s the imperative, a demand, a command – but it’s an imperative that can only come when repentance has been spoken freely.

You are loved. You are forgiven. Be at peace.

May it be so!

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The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

*You are Loved... You are Forgiven...
On Being at Peace
Isaiah 55.1-9; Luke 13.1-9
Russ Dean, March 7. 20-10*



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Russ Dean, March 7. 20-10*



We say it every week. And some of you have told us it's all you need to hear: "You are loved. You are forgiven. Be at peace."¹ I don't know where these words came from. They are not part of the Presbyterian Book of Common Worship, which is essentially the source of our current worship structure, having been patterned by Dr. Donald Mitchell in his year as your interim pastor, now a full decade ago.² The moment of confession may be part of that liturgy, but our ritualized offer of love and forgiveness is not. Sometime within the first few months of becoming your pastors, we hit upon these words as an "Assurance of Pardon," and they struck a chord. They have been indispensable in our Baptist "liturgy" ever since.

There is a certain power in those three simple sentences. Grammatically speaking, two are indicative statements – theological affirmations we simply claim (You are loved... You are forgiven...). The third is a grammatical imperative, offered in hope (Be at peace). I have encouraged our staff to speak those indicative words in the "second person," (You are loved, rather than We are loved ...) believing it is also needful to hear these words, directed to us... pronounced upon us... Spoken in this way, these two statements are not unlike a priest's absolution. None of your ministers claims to have (nor to want) priestly power. We do claim the insight of Jesus' words to his disciples, "When you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven... when you retain their sins, they are retained..." So, "We are forgiven," is a different statement all together than, "You are forgiven..."³

¹ These words have become the uniform expression of an "Assurance of Pardon" we offer in our time of confession each Sunday following the moment of silence.

² I actually don't know if Presbyterian worship is officially outlined in the Book of Common Worship. My point is simply that our worship has remained unchanged since Dr. Mitchell served as the interim pastor – and the time of confession was an addition to worship added during his brief but important tenure.

³ Various other associate ministers have tended to say, "We are..." In addressing my concern with our staff I was made aware that they were more comfortable suggesting those more inclusive words.

In the course of our lives we need not just affirm a belief in the truth of forgiveness; we need to actually experience being forgiven. If someone has hurt you, and musters the courage to ask forgiveness, what that person needs is not for you to say to, “Thank you for apologizing. Yes, we are forgiven.” Well, that’s a nice thought – but it is not what is needed in that moment. The person aching for forgiveness does not need a general affirmation, we’re all forgiven. . . No, the person needs to be told, preferably having had his or her name called, “Mary... Terry... Gail... Eric... Russ... you are forgiven.” So we speak those words every week. Most often in the second person, plural... “You are loved. You are forgiven.”

But recently I found myself asking if this is what we should be saying. There is no doubt that the first statement is accurate. You are loved. For you are! “God is love” is an affirmation for the Christian Church which goes without saying. Still, we need to be reminded – and need to be reminded that God’s unconditional love is love... well... without conditions! No matter who you are... no matter what confession you just brought into that moment of silence... no matter... No. Matter. You Are Loved. I hope it can be said of the people of this community of faith – no matter what or who you are... you are loved, by us. I do hope. But God’s unceasing love is bedrock truth for the Church. We need to speak this good news more often than we do – *Shout it from the rooftops*, as the scripture says! (Matthew 10.27)

But when we say, in tandem with that first affirmation “You are forgiven,” what does that mean? The question is just this: can you be forgiven if you’ve not asked for forgiveness? Can you really know forgiveness without having said, “I’m sorry”? Should we pronounce that powerful indicative: You are... if we don’t know if you’ve practiced the equally powerful act of repentance? Maybe we should say, “You are loved. And if you repented, you are forgiven”! (But that just doesn’t seem to have the same power.)

I’m actually quite comfortable pronouncing this blanket forgiveness. Too much else in this life is conditional: If I’m smart enough... if I’m good enough... if I’m rich enough... if I work hard enough... if I’m not overweight... if I pass the test.... if... if... if... This world knows so little forgiveness there’s no danger we’ll throw the balance to the other side by offering free forgiveness this one moment a week. Perhaps doing so helps to reinforce the affirmation of faith that so strongly undergirds such a universal

declaration. You are loved – because *God is love* (1 John 4.16). And you are forgiven – because God forgives (Psalm 103.12 among many other references). Period. That’s the theology. I stand by it.

But the practicality of it, may be different... altogether.

What is forgiveness with no repentance? Well, it’s a word. It’s only a word.⁴

And as important as it is to speak words, to give people the vocabulary of forgiveness, in terms of our actual living, the reality of our experience, there is no forgiveness without repentance. I can hear some of you right now – you might as well be thinking out loud! “I don’t like that word... repent.” You know, it’s just a little too... churchy. Too... preachy. Not quite... sophisticated enough for us! Maybe it reminds you of revivals you once attended, or radio preachers you occasionally hear, spewing their angry good news. And I do understand. Poor theology is poor theology. And repentance has too often been demanded from the other side of a pulpit that knew too little grace. The word has too often been delivered uncharitably. Has too often been the handmaid of guilt and fear, and offered as the only way to God’s approval and as the only currency by which to purchase that one-way ticket to heaven. I understand bad theology – and I hate that preaching is too often needed to right theological wrongs, some of which have been around about as long as there have been preachers mis-communicating them.⁵

But repent, we must. Choose some more sophisticated name if you like. Use the language of psychology or the latest fad in therapy if you must. But there’s just no way around saying “I’m sorry” if you want to be in healthy relationships. In her book, *Talking about Genesis*, Cynthia Ozick says,

Self-knowledge truthfully confronted (or call it historical honesty) is the only way reconciliation can supplant murderousness. Without self-knowledge – a thing (even) deeper than repentance – forgiveness, whether given or received, remains a hollow act.⁶

⁴ A Japanese proverb says: “Forgiving the unrepentant is like drawing pictures on water.”

⁵ I suppose, technically speaking, I should have said “communicating them,” because if they were miscommunicating theological wrongs they may actually be communicating theological rights... but you get the point!

⁶ Cynthia Ozick, in *Talking About Genesis*, quoted in *Living Pulpit*, “Repentance,” p.41.

Or, in the simpler words of St. Augustine: “Before God can deliver us, we must undeceive ourselves.”⁷ So when the prophets and the gospel writers and Jesus cried, “*Repent... or perish,*” they were not speaking as angry evangelists, fearful and motivated by bad theology, they were speaking plain truth. If you want to move ahead, you must acknowledge where you have been, what or whom you have left behind, and what relationships have been broken, in your wake.

Yes, poor theology is everywhere. Jesus confronted it in today’s story. I heard the very same theology this week (I hear it every week), but this week, it was in a radio interview with the heart-broken father of a daughter, recently killed in one of our wars. A helicopter pilot, his daughter’s bird of war went down in a fiery crash that took the life of a beautiful, faithful, committed young soldier. But the father gave thanks for God’s grace to his son-in-law, who, he explained, had once been stationed with his wife. Also a helicopter pilot, his marching orders had not long ago sent him on a different assignment. So God saw fit, the father praised, to move the son-in-law so he would not have to witness his wife’s tragic demise. Thanks be to God (?).

I find it tragic that so many people believe God is behind the scenes, manipulating every pieces of our lives – even ending our lives, at just a command. In the case of this father’s belief, if we’re faithful, or lucky (who knows which), even moving us so we don’t have to be there to see our wife meet her maker. In his commentary on this passage, William Loader says, “Even very traditional, respectable and respectful citizens come to the point where they have to recognize bastardry for what it is and stop attributing everything to God.”⁸

It was to ask of this same capricious, manipulative God, that unnamed questioners sought Jesus. Neither of the events in this text is mentioned in any other ancient writing, but there is no reason to believe they are not true. Pilate was ruthless, slaughtering thousands during his reign of

⁷ St. Augustine of Hippo, 354-430, quoted in Living Pulpit, “Repentance,” p.42.

⁸ This was a commentary on this passage that I located on the internet site: www.textweek.com.

power. And natural tragedy has always been with us. In this story, the writer called Luke counters many of our poorly conceived theologies of divine providence. Neither Jerusalemites nor Galileans (in other words, neither Jews nor Gentiles... i.e., neither the so-called “chosen” nor anyone else) get what they’ve got coming – as God’s vengeance. And neither human evil nor natural tragedy is the intentional work of God. Jesus puts those questions to rest: Who sinned? Were they not faithful enough? What did they do to deserve this? No. Bad things happen. But God is not the grand puppeteer behind the scenes, manipulating all of our strings so that we live and die as helpless marionettes. Jesus defies us to credit those tragedies to the judgment of God. Bad things just happen.

But...

Now here’s where it gets difficult, because with that little word, we’re tempted to reverse course and once again affirm the poor theology Jesus has just refuted. It’s easy to read this passage and overlook that all-important “No.” It’s easy to assume that what Jesus was really saying is those who perished did so as the judgment of God—and in the same manner (the judgment of God) we may all perish with them. But Jesus says “No!” Were the Galileans who died at Pilate’s hand worse sinners than others? No! Did those Jews who were killed in the tragedy in Jerusalem in some way deserve what they got? No!

No. No. No... But... *Unless you repent. You will die, too!*

It’s a strange way to convey this theological message – which actually is good news if we can hear it – but Jesus is just saying this is the fact of the matter. The message is simple: the time to repent is now. It is urgent. No one is promised tomorrow. They died. We might die, too. What would you leave unfinished if today were your last? It may be. And the reason to repent is practical. Not doing so means death. Not physical death, necessarily. And not God’s judgment to eternal death, heaven and hell stuff (though Jesus’ words may not preclude those implications). The point is just that if life is made of our

relationships – and it is – and if no relationship can survive without the honesty of saying “I’m sorry,” and without a corresponding forgiveness – and relationships cannot – Jesus’ message is just a stark reminder of how vitally important it is to be able to look at our self in the mirror and to fully recognize who it is that is looking back at us.

Unless you repent. You will die, too. The innocence of your childlike heart will die, suffocating in deceptions and lies, anger and jealousy. Individuals need to repent. I don’t need to tell you where in your life. Take a look in the mirror. Communities need to repent. Nations need to repent. Read the paper if you want a few examples... We’ve made poverty a virtual crime in this country, and hypocrisy a kind of moral value. 5,000 of Charlotte’s residents had no bed to call their own last night. We concentrate the poor in small communities that devolve, understandably so, probably inevitably so, in a spiral of hopelessness and helplessness and crime and violence and despair. The concentration of poverty virtually ensures that the cycle will continue – but we don’t want that kind of people in our back yard. (Unless, of course, they’re cutting our grass or cleaning out the septic tank.)⁹ We need to repent. We’re still building jails in this country at a grace-less, God-less pace, because we’re still not willing to ask why it is that any moral country could ever get to the point that it really needed to incarcerate more than one percent of its total population.¹⁰ We need to repent.

You do not need to believe we are judged for our sins to understand the urgency and necessity of repentance. I do not. This is what unconditional love means. This is why God says, “*My thoughts are not your (judgmental) thoughts... my ways are not your (un-forgiving) ways...*” We need not believe God stands apart from us and judges our every action – and get wrapped up in the poor theology that comes with such a judgmental view. God is the patient gardener: “Maybe we’ll cut it down next year.” But it is

⁹ A proposal to bring a mixed-income development to the affluent area of Ballentyne recently failed. Though the city officials bringing that proposal did a poor job (there were questions of conflicts of interest), this was the most obvious, loudest out-cry of “not in my backyard” that I have seen recently. Even though tax-payer dollars were used to move an interstate so Ballentyne could be built, originally, the call to use more taxes now to build affordable housing (for some of the people who provide the minimum-wage labor that keeps Ballentyne afloat), is decried as “social engineering.” (Did we not “engineer” the success of the first residents to Ballentyne? Why should the same logic not be applied to the less well-off?) Would Jesus side with the affluent or the minimum-wage earners?

¹⁰ For more on this subject, see my sermon on the prison industry in America: “An Obligation to Make Things Right,” May 25, 2008.

simply undeniable that we are judged by our sins.¹¹ You probably need not look beyond the confines of your own home to know this is true. Karl Barth once said, “Sin is the only empirically verifiable Christian doctrine.” In your office... your church... your city... your nation... in your home... in your heart. We need to repent.

Repentance, however, does not necessarily involve breast beating, a woe-is-me-wretched-sinner-that-I-am, contrition. This may, in fact, deter us from real repentance – which is movement. Forward. As the prominent 19th century Congregationalist minister, Henry Ward Beecher has said, “Repentance is another name for aspiration.”¹²

We offer a moment of confession every week. About one minute to reflect on your life. But real repentance does not occur in that moment. Nor does the forgiveness we speak. Repentance and forgiveness are worked out in the hard-knocks practice of human interaction. True repentance will occur only as we aspire to make life better than it has been – and as we take some step to move “forward” in our homes and schools and work places. Which brings us to the third of the sentences we speak each week. It’s the imperative, a demand, a command – but it’s an imperative that can only come when repentance has been spoken freely.

You are loved. You are forgiven. Be at peace.

May it be so!

¹¹ Though this is undoubtedly not an original thought, I heard it most succinctly put by Anne Lamott, in her book, *Traveling Mercies*: “We are not judged for our sins, but by them.”

¹² One of the meditations printed in today’s bulletin was from Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*: “The prophets called Israel to repent... They sought to transform their social world so that the future would be different: “*Seek the Lord and Live! Seek good, and not evil that you may live!*” (Amos 5)... The purpose of the prophets was not to reveal the future, but to change it. The crisis announced by the pre-destruction prophets thus had both present and future dimensions. The future crisis was the threatened end of society, and the present crisis was the need to change the state of affairs that was leading to the catastrophe before it was too late.”