



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

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## Forgiving, Forgetting, and Faith

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 119:9-16 and Jeremiah 31:31-34

The main claim in today's scripture passage is that there will be a new covenant between God and the Israelites. Covenants were often used throughout the Old Testament to understand the relationship between God and God's people. Covenants differ from modern day contracts. A contract is an agreement negotiated between two parties and entered into willfully. Ancient covenants are much more unilateral: one party – God -- is much more powerful than the other --God's people --, and so sets the terms by which the two parties will relate. Such a covenant does not require the weaker party's consent or willingness, and there is no room for negotiation.

To understand what this new covenant might have meant theologically to the Israelites and to us today, it is helpful to remember the meaning of the original covenant God made with Moses at Mt. Sinai. That covenant, called the Ten Commandments, was the central event for all Israelite life and thought in what we know of as the Old Testament, and had a profound impact on Christian thinking in the New. In the original covenant God promised to liberate the Hebrews from slavery and in return they promised to act like liberated people. That meant two things: worshiping only God, and treating others in the same manner they had been treated by God. As God's chosen, liberated people their only requirement was that they live lives that were different from those of the other nations. God's chosen people failed miserably at keeping up their end of the covenant.

Listen to the new covenant God offers God's chosen people.

Read Jeremiah 31:31-34.

When we meet up with the Hebrew people in today's scripture passage, they have suffered a catastrophe; the Babylonians have destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and dragged King Zedekiah off in chains. They have lost power, freedom, security and, most critically, the assurance of God's faithfulness. "How could this happen to us, God's chosen people?" they wonder. The prophet Jeremiah assures them God's faithfulness remains intact in spite of current circumstances.

Despite the Israelites not keeping faith with God, God will not break faith with them. Instead of another word of judgment, they receive unexpected good news. God will give them a second chance, a second opportunity to bring about the world God intended. God is promising a new covenant that will be written within them, on their hearts rather than imposed upon them from the outside. The new

covenant declares people will longer know *about* God, all the right words, all the right theology, they will *know* God with all the intimacy that word entails. This covenant speaks to a sense of belonging as God declares, "*I will be their God and they shall be my people*" (v.33b). This covenant differs significantly from the previous one as God also promises, "*I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more*" (v. 34b).

We are well versed in knowing God forgives sin. Yet this covenant also includes God's intentional decision not just to forgive sin but to remember their sin no more. God is willing to forget Israel's sinfulness, betrayal, and infidelity, in other words -- to let go of the past and remember their sin no more. What great good news!

The problem for the Israelites is that they could not forget their sin. The golden calf incident was part of their collective memory. They could recall corrupt kings and priests, they remembered their infidelity as they worshipped foreign gods. Unable to forget their sin, it created distance between themselves and God preventing them from fully experiencing God's love. *They* distanced themselves from God, not the other way around. So God, in great love, does what Israel cannot: God forgets.

And if God forgets, might we also?

While working as a hospital chaplain, I visited with a couple whose daughter had been born with several birth anomalies. They were deeply distraught, grieving that the life they had envisioned for their daughter would be distinctly different given the necessary surgeries she faced. The father, much more distraught than his wife, was convinced their daughter's birth anomalies was God's punishment for things he had done as a soldier serving in the Vietnam War. He could not accept God would forgive his past actions. His emotional brokenness and guilt were palpable. His sense of guilt seemed far more debilitating, more insurmountable, than the physical challenges his daughter faced.

"We gather our arms full of guilt as though it were precious stuff. It must be that we want it that way", John Steinbeck wrote. Is that really what we want? Do we really want to live our lives burdened by sins of commission and omission, the wrong actions we do and the positive actions we fail to do?

Sins of omission seem less tangible than the sins we commit but they are just as grievous. I experienced the painfulness of sins of omission in regard to the suicide of my brother.

Having worked as a chaplain on an Adult Psychiatric unit, I knew, in my head, that suicide is a person's choice. I also knew that persons who want to commit suicide are determined to do so. But suicide raises unanswerable questions about that person's mental, emotional and physical condition when such action is taken. Suicide, we all know, is extremely complicated and emotionally charged. Suicide continues to carry significant stigma even as strides are made toward education and understanding of it. "What-if" questions seem to be a designated companion to suicide.

Two years after my brother's death, I attended a conference focused on the overall health and well-being of ministers. Inherent in the conference's design was time for prayer and self-reflection allowing the things that disquiet one's spirit to make their presence known. What surfaced for me was a deep sense of guilt over my brother's suicide. I had grieved his death but I had not dealt with my sense of guilt. I had not dealt with the anguishing what-if questions that remained. "What if I had called him more frequently? What if I had gone to visit him more often? What-if I had been able to figure out what he was thinking and stop him? What-if? What-if?"

A Service of Wholeness and Healing was held at the conference and I took the opportunity to briefly share with and be prayed for by two leaders. I am not sure what made that time different from the other times I had asked for God's forgiveness in relationship to my brother. Perhaps, it was choosing to trust God's efficacy to forgive was greater than my guilt. Perhaps it was my weariness over carrying that burden, perhaps it was the power of others petitioning God on my behalf. Whatever it was, in that moment, I was able to accept God's forgiveness. I returned to my seat aware of a visceral reaction within me, it felt as if my head was higher no longer weighed down by a necklace of bricks. I felt forgiven! I felt released from my burden! I felt free!

When I am tempted to meander down the path of "what could I have done differently" or dwell on obstinate "what-if" questions I remind myself God's intentional decision was to forgive and *forget* my sin. I tell myself not to pick up that burden of guilt which has been forgiven. I remind myself God is faithful. Then I thank God for forgiveness and force myself to think of something else.

God chooses to forget our sin out of great love for us. Don't we wish we could do the same? Don't we wish we could forget the painful things we have said and the ways we have hurt others, intentionally or unintentionally? Do we not yearn to be free from our sins and shortcomings in relationship with others? It would be wonderful if we could forget such things and start over with a clean slate, would it not? It would be so life-giving, so freeing to trust God has not only forgiven, but forgotten, our every sin! When we remember our sins and shortcomings so keenly, how do we trust God graces us with forgetting our past?

A helpful beginning would be to remind ourselves of Jesus and his behavior. To remember his patience as he explained time and time again the meaning of his teachings, and responded with compassion toward persons who were ill in body, mind or spirit. To remember the disciples falling asleep as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane and their speedy desertion when the authorities arrived. To remember the questioning, taunting and torture he endured before being nailed to the cross and to remember his request to the heavens as he hung there, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Jesus is the revelation of God so when we look at his behavior we glimpse the behavior of God. Jesus enacted on the cross the same forgiveness God promises with God's chosen people in the new covenant. We can barely fathom such unconditional love, it is more than we can fully comprehend.

The first chapter of John's Gospel includes this verse: "*From God's fullness we have all received, grace upon grace*" (v.16). Grace is God's unmerited love and salvation freely given. God's promise not only to forgive but also to forget our sin is grace topped with more grace with additional grace piled on.

What would it be like for you and for me to repair the damage our sin has caused, as far as it lies within our power, and then rest in the God who does not hold against us the harm we have caused? We may not forget certain memories but we can stop being held hostage by them. We can choose to trust God's intention that we live as individuals forgiven and liberated from our sins. God has promised to forgive and forget all that estranges us from God for a new and better relationship with each one of us. God's promise, God's covenant, was this: "*I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more*" (v.34).

What do you need to trust God has forgiven and forgotten? Amen.