

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost  
August 2, 2015  
**"CLEANING UP"**  
By Marry Anne Biggs

Psalm 51:1-12 ~ John 6:24-35

Last summer when I was down for the count I wasted a lot of time channel surfing. Now, there's not much worth watching on daytime television. It's a lot like nighttime television. But I happened across an archived program that featured a rather large woman who called herself Mother Love. Mother Love had a guest on her show who tearfully confessed how she had betrayed her best friend with her boyfriend, but she was sorry and hoped her friend might take her back. They showed the best friend back stage nodding her head with some attitude as she listened to how her former friend had done her wrong. Then came the moment of truth ... would the wounded friend forgive or not? They had a door placed on the stage which the penitent would open. If she was forgiven, her friend would be standing there waiting for a reconciling hug. If she was unforgiven, the doorway would be painfully empty and she would be left standing alone. But even then, Mother Love would offer her the comfort that maybe someday, with the passing of time, this wounded friend mind find it in her heart to forgive and forget ... which turned out to be the name of the show.

I have to admit, *Forgive and Forget* confronted me with my own classism because most of the guests were kind of like the Jerry Springer/World Wrestling Federation crowd. They weren't whacking each other on the head with metal folding chairs, but it was a kind of tasteless emotional exhibitionism. You wondered how anybody could make such a mess of their lives. Where do they get these people? But the honest confrontation was good, as was the whole confession-repentance-reconciliation process, and the symbol of the door. Most of all I liked the frank recognition that sometimes we hurt the people we care about most, and that we need to ask forgiveness. Sometimes, the people we care about the most hurt us, and we need to forgive.

There is a movement in some circles to do away with the whole sin/guilt/forgiveness model of Christian faith because it is considered too negative. And admittedly, the church has not always led people to healing ... but left them feeling unforgiven and unforgivable ... as if God were not standing at the door waiting to welcome them back. What's more, what is and isn't called a sin has changed with the winds of interpretation and culture across the years, so that people have been punished and excluded unnecessarily ... while other sins have been ignored because they were socially acceptable at the time. Some of you have been so shamed by the church that you can hardly hear any sermon on sin without feeling abused again. But you still need forgiveness. Because even if you aren't guilty of what you've been accused of ... or what they accuse of you isn't a sin ... you have other sins you need to deal with ... and you can't be fully healed until you can forgive others for what they have done to you.

Ya'll know that I'm not some bible-thumping, hellfire and damnation preacher. It's not easy for me to preach about sin ... not only because "who am I to talk" ... but also because it makes me feel as antique as a television tube. Who talks about sin anymore? It's so old-fashioned, even Karl Menninger's book *Whatever Became of Sin?* is forty years old. Most people in our hyper-individualistic moment believe there is no right and wrong ... just your opinion ... and every individual decides for him- or herself. Well, that might be true if you live in a bubble, and never connect with anyone else. But our lives are defined by relationships ... to God, to one another, in our families and work and church and other associations, too. And inevitably in those relationships, we do things that hurt each other. Accidentally, intentionally, repeatedly along the way we say things, we do things ... or we neglect in ways that do damage and we must repair our relationships. Otherwise, they will wither away and die. The Bible calls these things which damage our relationship with God or with one another "sin," and we are all habitual offenders.

Now if we are caring people, we feel guilt when we hurt somebody. And guilt is good! I'm not talking about shame. Shame is when you are convinced that *you* are no good ... that you are not capable of doing better. Nothing good comes of shame. But guilt is what happens when you have done a bad thing. It is your own conscience calling you to fix it. Guilt is the emotional equivalent of physical pain. Nobody likes to feel pain, but it's your body's way of saying something's wrong, get help. It's very dangerous to be numb, because you don't know you're the one who's bleeding until it's too late. Guilt is the same thing on a relational level. It's your heart's way of telling you something is wrong which needs to be fixed. Nobody likes to feel guilty, but if you become so insensitive ... if you are numb to the people around you ... you won't even know you're doing damage. You won't even realize you're killing off the very relationships that give you life.

Some people run from guilt, because of the shame they feel. They can't admit that they've done wrong because it makes them feel so badly about themselves, and they already feel so badly about themselves, that they can't take any more. So they blame somebody else. Or they plead extenuating circumstances. Or they redefine the offense so it's not really offensive. Or they accuse the other of doing worse to them ... anything to escape the guilt they feel ... anything that is, except taking responsibility, making amends, and refusing to do wrong again. I was browsing in a gift shop once when I came across a bar of "Sinners Soap." "98.9% guilt free," it advertised. "Wash away your sins." I turned it over and read the directions: *Turn on water ... wet hands ... lather thoroughly ... rinse hands ... repent.*

At \$8.95 it was a real bargain. Unfortunately, it didn't come in industrial strength.

God gave us directions long ago for dealing with our guilt. The Bible says, *"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:8-9). Which is to say, "Clean up your mess. Fess up and apologize. Take responsibility for the damage you do. God will be waiting behind the door to forgive you."

And the door where God waits to forgive us is at this table we share this Sunday. Have you ever shared a meal with someone with whom you were just furious? You eat in silence and your food tastes bitter and your stomach is churning. I'm not saying this has ever happened in my

household, but you know, anger can sure spoil a meal. Today I am talking about forgiveness, because if things aren't right between us and God ... or if we come to the table with enmity in our heart towards others ... this table won't do us much good. After all, this table is all about healthy soul to soul relationship with one another and with God. That's why it's called "communion."

The fifty-first psalm is a model of how we clean up to prepare for our sacred Sunday Dinner. It is ascribed to David on the occasion of his sin with Bathsheba ... after he sent her husband to the front lines so he could be killed ... after the prophet Nathan confronted him.

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.*

The psalmist believes that God is far more willing to forgive than we are to repent. God is far more desirous of restoring us to spiritual health than we are to seek it.

*For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.*

The psalmist recognizes specific guilt before God and is plagued by the memory of the damaging offense. It remains there, an obstacle between the psalmist and God. The psalmist cannot rest until the obstacle is removed and the relationship is restored. Even if the psalmist could make excuses and plead extenuating circumstances before others because they are no better, before God there are no good excuses.

*You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.*

Being forgiven *is* like bathing. It's renewing. It's refreshing. A load is lifted when we finally come clean. How does the old saying go? "We are not punished for the sin ... but by the sin." When we damage others, we also damage ourselves. And some of the greatest damage we do is not forgiving others. In the Jewish Talmud, you are responsible to seek forgiveness three times, but then if the person you have offended refuses to forgive you, then they bear the guilt for the offense which occurred because they are keeping it alive and preventing the rift in the social fabric from being mended. Anne Lamott says, "*Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.*" Refusing forgiveness damages us more than our offenders. Even when we are just in our anger, our bitterness just continues our victimization. Jesus said, "forgive and you shall be forgiven." To receive grace is to offer it. To offer grace is to understand the price God pays to forgive you. And what offense has anyone committed against you that is too big to be covered by the grace of the table? Give it up, forgive it, and be healed.

*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.*

Perhaps the hardest person to forgive is yourself. You have to admit that you aren't as good as you thought. You have to accept that you need to change something about yourself. You have to receive what somebody else did for you ... that you could not do for yourself. But if God forgives you, who are you not to forgive yourself?

"To err is human, to forgive Divine." It really isn't in our power to forgive other people. But it is within God's power. It is within God's power within us! In fact, if there is a sure sign that God is at work within us ... it is when we are able to be grace giving and forgiving with others. It takes humility to forgive ... because it means giving up the power you have over another person ... giving up your rights as a victim. It takes faith ... because forgiveness is the belief that you and another can have a better future than what you have experienced in the past.

How much anger and bitterness do we allow to eat our hearts away until we are numb when life is too short ... life is too precious to waste? "Listen!" Jesus says, "I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me" (Rev 3:20). Beloved, I invite you to open the door and find Jesus waiting to forgive you. And then join us in this table of grace.

May we pray?

Create in us clean hearts, O God. Forgive us our sins of commission and omission. Forgive us for not forgiving, but teach us to be merciful as you are merciful. Make us grace-living, grace-giving souls so that the human family, so divided and broken, might be healed by your love through us, in the name of Christ. Amen.