

Forget Not All His Benefits

“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity ...” Psalm 103:2-3a.

When I was at seminary one of the things that we had to do early on in our time there, was to serve as liturgist for a worship service. While leading in this way becomes second nature to the job of the pastor, for those beginning their training to become pastors this can be quite intimidating. Thankfully, there are several service options each day, so you don't have to start out with the most public and detailed services that are offered.

Sometimes, it was easiest to start with the early morning service that started around 7 a.m. Depending on the morning this would be a small group, and the service was short so your time under pressure was quicker than other services. Yet, the length of the service didn't matter that much because it took time to get comfortable being in front of people, especially your classmates who knew you.

I remember when one dear classmate of mine led that morning service for his first time. He did a great job. He made his way through all the elements of the service and was in the final parts of the service. Like our services on the weekend, the prayers are the last piece of the service. He knelt for prayer and all he needed to do was start the Lord's Prayer and he was home free! But as he knelt, he froze. Eventually, nervously chuckling, he says to the group, “I need help, I forgot how it starts.” The group helped him right away and he went on to finish his studies well and now has faithfully been serving the Church for many years.

Like that classmate of mine, I get how easy it is to forget something you thought you knew so well! Even now 10 years into pastoral ministry, coming back from time away and getting back into the routines here at Emmanuel, there are times that I've nearly forgotten parts of the service that I normally know quite well. In the heat of the moment, even the things we think we know can be quickly forgotten.

At the beginning of our service, I had us read this weekend's psalm together. At the start of this psalm, we hear the reminder to not forget all the Lord's benefits and the first benefit mentioned is forgiveness. This is what we read earlier, **“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity ...”** (*Psalm 103:2-3a*) And David who wrote this psalm, certainly has the experience to write these words. He is a great saint of the Bible, but he is also one of the Bible's greatest sinners. He personally knew how important the Lord's forgiveness was among all the benefits that the Lord provides.

Yet, there's a reason why David reminds himself and us not to forget the Lord's benefits, especially that of forgiveness. Like my classmate with the Lord's Prayer, this gift of forgiveness is something that we often claim we know well here in this sanctuary, but when we step outside into the pressures of this sinful world, we quickly forget. And this can be a fearful reality as these moments of forgetfulness lead to lack of assurance and compassion. As we consider two examples of this truth from our readings this weekend, I encourage you to also think about this truth in your own life.

In our first reading this weekend, we find ourselves in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, in the final chapter, 50, reading the conclusion to a story that started 13 chapters earlier in Genesis 37. Here's a brief recap. Joseph was separated from his family by his jealous brothers. Enslaved in Egypt, he went through several ups and downs and eventually was reunited with his family many years later as he served as second in command in Egypt helping numerous people survive a seven-year famine. Joseph's reunion with his family was a powerful moment of reconciliation and forgiveness and for 17 years things seemed to be restored.

However, as our reading this weekend shares, Joseph's dad, Jacob, dies. When Jacob dies, Joseph's brothers are filled with fear because of their past sins. They think that with their dad out of the picture, Joseph will now show his true colors and seek revenge on them all these years later. It appears that Joseph's brothers have forgotten all the benefits that Joseph shared with them these past 17 years and without their dad in the picture they lack the assurance that Joseph will continue to treat them the same way. So, they attempt to continue to make their dad a buffer, even though he's dead, by concocting a message that their dad supposedly spoke on his death bed urging Joseph to continue to be forgiving and merciful.

Hearing this message from his brothers and seeing their fear, Joseph is deeply moved not to avenge but to assure. He points his brothers to the way that God used their evil intentions for tremendous good. Then he reassures them that he will continue to provide not only for them but also their families. Even though Satan drummed up forgetfulness and fear in the brothers because of their past sins, the Lord used Joseph to assure them that the past 17 years weren't a sham. The buffer in this situation wasn't ultimately their earthly dad, but the God of their father, Jacob, their heavenly father too. **“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who**

forgives all your iniquity ... as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.” (*Psalm 103:2-3a, 12*)

Our weekend’s Gospel reading from Matthew contains the other example for us to consider. After hearing Jesus address what greatness looks like in the kingdom of God and how the process of forgiveness is crucial to this, Peter asks, **“‘Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’”** Recognizing the underlying implication of Peter’s question, Jesus responds with a parable about a king settling accounts with his servants.

One servant owes the king an enormous debt that not even multiple lifetimes could repay. At his pleading, the king forgives the massive debt. In turn that forgiven servant goes out and demands repayment from a fellow servant on a debt that is significantly smaller than the debt that had just been forgiven him. The first servant, forgetting the king’s forgiveness and compassion, imprisons his fellow servant which brings fear to the other fellow servants who see what happens. In their fear, they tell the king what has happened and the king reprimands that first servant, places his debt back on him and throws him into prison.

The question Peter asked at the beginning of this reading implies that there is a limit to forgiveness. This is what Jesus’ parable addresses. The forgiveness and compassion Peter shares with others is directly connected to the forgiveness and compassion the Lord has already shown him. If he wants to turn off his forgiveness and compassion toward others, then ultimately, he’s telling God that he wants Him to turn off the forgiveness and compassion He’s been giving him. The Lord’s forgiveness and compassion for Peter ought to move Peter not to ask when enough is enough, but to never give up on seeking to share the forgiveness and compassion he has received. **“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity ... As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.”** (*Psalm 103:2-3a, 13*)

Boy, I don’t know about you, but these examples in our readings hit home. Can you relate to Joseph’s brothers as past sins raise fear and forgetfulness with the Lord’s forgiveness. When circumstances change in your life, especially as they get difficult and challenging, is it easy to start believing that maybe the Lord’s forgiveness is running out on you?

Then are there times when you feel like those fellow servants, fearful because of how another so-called believer forgets the Lord’s forgiveness and compassion and acts so uncompassionately towards others? Have things ever taken that even more humbling turn when you suddenly recognize that you are that unmerciful servant who is causing so much fear in everyone else?

Well, I don’t say this lightly, but welcome to the club. That’s not to dismiss or excuse our sinful actions but merely to acknowledge how easy it is for all of us to forget God’s forgiveness, to give into fear, and to further a lack of personal assurance and communal compassion. Yes, we might say that we know God’s forgiveness well in this place, but out there in the pressures of this sinful world it’s sad and shameful how quickly this knowledge leaves our hearts, minds, and actions. Oh, forgetful that people we are, who can save us from this fear and shame! Who can assure us! Who can show us and teach us compassion! Who can remind us of and share with us the benefits we need and lack!

“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity ... as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.” (*Psalm 103:2-3a, 12-13*) Right now, our Lord Jesus reminds us of and delivers to us the benefits we need and lack. From His victory on the cross and over the grave, He assures us of forgiveness without limits. By His Word and Sacraments, He places into our lives the forgiveness we so frequently need. Through the prayer He has taught us, He shows and teaches us compassion as we pray and learn to live out, “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” And as we regularly gather together in classrooms, homes, and restaurants to grow and mature in the faith that he gives and sustains in us here in worship, He builds us up to continually remember His benefits, especially His forgiveness, even in the face of the pressures of this sinful world. **“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity.”** (*Psalm 103:2-3a*) Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan