

The Forgiveness of Sins

I John 1: 7—2:2

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I haven't really wanted to be thought of as the grandfatherly type. I've still got some gospel fire in the belly and I'd rather be known for being passionate than cuddly. Still, I have to say with grandchild number 4 on the way, I like being Granddaddy a whole lot. When asked how it is to have grandchildren, I find myself replying, "It feels like, well, *forgiveness*." I don't know forgiveness for what specifically. But just this overall sense that for all the mess ups, the neglects, the rough edges in my parenting and my life, here is this ridiculously gracious gift of getting to see that your life goes on in this little one. And that love wins out in the end. Such forgiveness is like a cool breeze of relief. A reprieve. A return of hope. And opening up of the future.

The Apostles' Creed declares, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." What a bizarre, wonderful, surprising statement to include in the story-line of our most essential beliefs. What a needed word in these weird times. On the one hand, saying we believe in *the forgiveness of sins* sounds outrageous. Who still believes there are *sins* to forgive? Surely we don't believe outdated ideas about sexuality or getting high or spinning a story to sound more like what you want, do we? And who would dare declare that something in my life is a *sin*? That's outrageous, oppressive judgment. Who would imply that I am accountable to anyone but myself? Forgiveness of sins sounds really bizarre.

On the other hand, forgiveness also sounds wonderful. For we live in a stridently unforgiving society. The word floating about these days is that we are in a "cancel culture." If someone holds an opinion contrary to what is considered right and just, we cancel their appearances. We cancel a showing of their movie. We take their book off of Amazon. If you say the wrong thing, and stumble over the trip wires of what is considered a social justice issue, you have about thirty minutes to abjectly and fully prostrate yourself in total apology. And you still may be covered in vitriol and shredded in reputation. Once social media turns against you, there is no mechanism for forgiveness. You are condemned and it's done. This is true in middle school and politics, on the college campus and in business. One stumble and it's over. How we long for the healing balm of forgiveness. We crave a way to find restoration.

When I am covered in shame, is there a way back? When I have guilt on my hands I cannot wash away, drink away or rationalize away, is there a cleanser to get the stain out? When I have run afoul of God or the gods of social media, is there hope for me? Paul's words to Timothy give us reason to hope. "This saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (I Timothy 1: 15). Yes, one has come to forgive sin. As the old hymn says, "His blood can make the foulest clean, his blood availed for me." I believe in the forgiveness of sins. Though the idea of sin seems outmoded, the reality of our guilt and the harsh unforgiving nature of our world makes us all long for this news. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, even the foremost sinners.

The "forgiveness of sins" was not part of the earliest versions of our creed. It got added at a particular time in history. In AD 303, the Emperor Diocletian began a new persecution of Christians. He "ordered that the property of Christians be seized, their books burned and their places of worship destroyed. All Christian leaders were to be imprisoned."¹ We were told we were on the wrong side of history. Only those who sacrificed to the Roman gods, including acknowledging the divinity of the emperor, would be released. Some of us gave into the fear, and showed proper obedience to the mood of the culture. We went along to get along. After all, it wasn't really a big deal. Offering the sacrifice didn't mean you believed it in your heart. But others of us were martyred. We died rather than enact an outward betrayal of our Lord. It was a hard, conflicted time.

Of course thinking you know what side of history you are on in the present moment is always a gamble. Just a decade later, the new emperor Constantine made Christianity legal again. And just 20 years later, in AD 323 Christianity became the official religion of the world's largest empire. If you ride the waves of cultural opinion, keep your surf board waxed: new waves are coming all the time.

And the change from outlaw to acceptance created another crisis for Christians. The Christians who had denied Christ and made the pagan sacrifices wanted to come back to church. They wanted back into the community of Jesus worshippers. Think how you would feel if you had lost a son or parent to martyrdom, and then someone whose whole family survived based on their denial now wants to be restored. Should they be forgiven? What about the pastors who gave in and denied Jesus? Did their ministries even count? Christ's people wrestled with this question. We came to a conclusion. It is an essential part of faith to declare, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." You can't sin so far that you can't come back.

In September, 2018, off duty police officer Amber Guyger shot and killed Botham Jean in his Dallas apartment. She claimed she made a tragic mistake, thinking she was in her own apartment and that Botham was an intruder. Botham was eating ice cream as he watched television. Last month, a jury convicted Guyger of murder and sentenced her to ten years in prison.

Brandt Jean, the 18-year-old brother of the slain man, spoke in court during the sentencing phase of the trial. His words were remarkable, as were his actions.

“I don’t want to say twice or for the hundredth time how much you’ve taken from us. I think you know that. But I just...I hope you go to God with all the guilt, all the bad things you may have done in the past. Each and every one of us may have done something we’re not supposed to do. If you truly are sorry, I speak for myself, I forgive you. If you go to God and ask him, he will forgive you... but I love you just like everyone else. And I’m not going to say I hope you rot and die just like my brother did, I personally want the best for you. And I wasn’t going to ever say this in front of my family or anyone, but, I don’t even want you to go to jail. I want the best for you. Because I know that’s exactly what Botham would want you to do and the best would be to give your life to Christ... I think giving your life to Christ would be the best thing that Botham would want you to do. Again I love you as a person. I don’t wish anything bad on you.” Then he turned to the judge and asked, “I don’t know if this is possible but can I give her a hug please? Please?”²

When I watch this sincere, unscripted moment of a declaration of forgiveness followed by a hug, I am moved to tears. Watching follow up interviews with this young man, I see that he is motivated by deep faith in Jesus and sincere desire to follow the path of forgiveness he has experienced.

The Jean family are deeply Christian. Brandt later spoke of how he knew that the only way to be free of the pain and the anger of his brother’s death was to practice forgiveness. He based his decision to forgive on knowing that God has forgiven him.

Some in our “cancel culture” could not tolerate an act of forgiveness. Especially since it seemed the police officer got off with a lighter than normal sentence for what was deemed not manslaughter but murder. Especially since Brandt has dark skin and Guyger has white skin. Especially for those who did not feel Guyger was sorry enough or was worthy of being forgiven. Especially for those who wanted to make the scene about racial injustice. It just doesn’t fit the

“cancel culture” narrative to forgive. But in our native culture, the kingdom of heaven, there runs a mighty river of grace from which we may drink deep.

I’m sure I don’t know all the nuances of the event or the trial. But I do know the sincerity in Brandt Jean’s voice, words, and actions. And I know the strength of faith and the courage of character it takes to choose to release someone who has done you grievous harm. It requires having access to a deeper source of forgiveness. It requires the maturity to know that you, too, are a sinner, capable of anything, and forgiven only at enormous cost. It requires experiencing yourself that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from every sin. That the blood of Christ is true drink indeed from the River of Life.

Last week I opened a newsletter from my friend Dorothy Wallis, the executive director of Caring to Love Ministries. She recounted the story of Julia who was trapped in chains of unforgiveness. Such guilt led her to a string of “self-punishing decisions. For Julia, “murderer” had replaced her identity as a mother.” Several years ago, Julia backed out of her driveway not realizing her young son had been playing behind the car. What mother can live knowing her failure led to her son’s death? A year later, Julia became pregnant. But she did not feel she deserved to be a mother again. How could she be trusted? Julia decided she was unworthy to have another child and so in shame she had the baby aborted. Now she spiraled down further as she felt like she had another life on her hands. When she became pregnant again, Julia’s thinking became so muddled that she thought God had allowed the pregnancy so that she would abort another child and complete her self-destructing punishment for being such a bad mother. That’s the way guilt without forgiveness can work in us.

But while Julia searched online for an abortion clinic, an ad for Caring to Love popped up. She went to the center and told her story. Instead of being condemned, they told Julia of the truth of God’s love for her and all her children. They shared the gospel that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, even the foremost. God’s desires to show her mercy, not punishment. There is no sin so great that Jesus’ sacrifice cannot forgive it. There is no stain of shame so deep that Jesus’ blood cannot cleanse it. As long as we have breath it is not too late to cry out to the Lord for mercy. We confess and he forgives. For Christ Jesus has taken all our sin. This was the true story she needed to hear. Julia realized that she, even she, had been forgiven. She kept her baby and now lives in renewed hope as a forgiven sinner and a beloved mother.

What a glorious gospel text we have this morning! Listen again to the kinds of things John tells us. “The blood of Jesus cleanses us from every sin...If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wrong.... If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation—the atoning sacrifice, the payment—for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”

Paul declared, “This saying is trustworthy—you can rely on it—it is worthy of full acceptance—it will hold up in the worst circumstances—Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—he came for you and he came for me—of whom I am the foremost. When you think you are the worst, when you have done the worst, when you have fallen beyond grace, then hear the announcement. It is precisely for you that he came. To save the chief of sinners. And when each one of us knows that, knows the depth of sacrifice required to save us, we tap into the Source that Brandt Jean knows. Because of Jesus, we can forgive. It is the most compelling, transformative witness we can make in this cancel culture. Jesus Christ has atoned for our sins, and the sins of the whole world. This gives us the power to enact that forgiveness to others. I believe in the forgiveness of sins.

¹ Ben Myers, *The Apostles’ Creed: A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2018), p. 113.

² To read about the Guyger trial and Brandt’s forgiveness, see <https://heavy.com/news/2019/10/brandt-jean/> and <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/28/765412762/dallas-police-officer-amber-guyger-expresses-deep-remorse-in-murder-trial>. Watch the video of Brandt’s statement here: <https://youtu.be/dJH4adVazl4>