

"Naming Sin & Grace"

2 Samuel 11:26-12:15 & Luke 7:36-8:3

June 13, 2004

A good Irish, Catholic girl went to London hoping to find work as a secretary and after a short time began sending home money and gifts to her parents. After a few years they asked her to come home for a visit, as her father was getting frail and elderly. She pulled up to the family home in a Rolls Royce and stepped out wearing furs and diamonds. As she walked into the house her father said "Hmmm, they seem to be paying secretaries awfully well in London."

The girl took his hands and said, "Dad, I've been meaning to tell you something for years but I didn't want to put it in a letter. I can't hide it from you any longer. I've become a prostitute."

Her father gasped, put his hand on his heart and keeled over. The doctor was called but the old man had clearly lost the will to live. He was put to bed and the priest was called. As the priest began to administer Extreme Unction, with the mother and daughter weeping and wailing, the old man muttered weakly, "I'm a goner, killed by me own daughter! Killed by the shame of what you've become!"

"Please forgive me," his daughter sobbed, "I only wanted to have nice things! I wanted to be able to send you money and the only way I could do it was by becoming a prostitute."

Brushing the priest aside, the old man bolted upright in bed, smiling. "Did ye say prostitute? I thought ye said PROTESTANT"

What sins do you name as sin? A woman came up behind Jesus as He was having a meal in the home of a Pharisee - a good, devout religious man. The Pharisee knew immediately who she was - she was a sinner. Although the Bible does not clearly identify what the sin was, many quickly assume that she was a prostitute [that's prostitute - not protestant]. She was so repulsive in her sin that the Pharisee thought she should not be allowed to even touch Jesus. What would you include in such a list of sins that made the sinner too dirty to touch Jesus?

The Apostle Paul makes an off-handed comment that would have been readily accepted as the truth by any good Jew of Paul's day. He talks about being a Jew from birth and not one of the 'Gentile sinners'. They named sin to include anyone who happened to be of a different nationality or religion and yet would not count themselves among 'the sinners'.

And then there is David - the greatest King of Israel - the one through who's line of descendants would come the Savior of the world. David, who was so outraged at the story of the rich man who stole the only lamb of a poor man and yet, who had not been willing to name his own sin. Of course it is easier to see the sin in someone else's life. Do we see our own?

How do you name sin? Is the sinner the prostitute or the protestant? the lamb thief or the covetous murder? the sefl-righteous Pharisee or the Gentile sinner or the woman whom everyone knew for her sin? As we see the 'sinners' parade before us in scripture this Sunday, do we see ourselves among the sinners?

We gather each Sunday and most Sundays we begin with a public, corporate confession of our sinfulness. For many it is a mere formality - another part of the liturgy that we just recite week after week - just another boring page to read through once again.. For others it is a deeply personal and profound moment during which they feel the weight of their personal sin - and search for some hope - they are looking for some sign that maybe they are not the scum that they feel like - longing for that word of forgiveness. Where are you at with the naming of sin? Do you find it really easy to look around and point a finger at the 'real' sinners? Or do you hear these words and become all the more convicted of your own brokenness before God?

Often I take heart as I think of these things and think also of scriptures like the ones we have read this morning. I find myself thinking about people like David, the great king and many others. And I wonder: Why was David not disowned by God for his disgraceful actions? Why was the adulteress not condemned by Jesus for her open disregard of the moral laws? Why was Peter not disavowed by God after his blatant denial of Christ in the courtyard? Why was Paul not banished by God forever because of his persecution of the Christians early in his life? Why? If you listen closely to each of these Biblical stories - that is where the real message is. It is not in the failure of all of these people or even the greatness of their sin. The real story is in a God who does not reject them even when we think the sin is too great to forgive. The real story is in a God who is so gracious that even when the sin is as bad as David's, God continues to uphold, encourage and send that person as one of His children with a job to do. And if you get right down to it - the real story is in the fact that God doesn't just forgive and send people like David and Paul and a Pharisee and a sinful woman He forgives and send me and you!

Karl Menninger, the famed psychiatrist, once said that if he could convince the patients in psychiatric hospitals that their sins were forgiven, 75 percent of them could walk out the next day! It seems like a radical claim but I think that it must be true. I have seen it played out in the lives of many people. People who struggle with sin and guilt and even though they know the gospel and have heard of God's forgiveness many time - somehow, they do not believe it works for them.

Someone has said: If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator; If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist; If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist; If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer; But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior.

Forgiveness came to David, to the Gentiles and even to a woman at the feet of Jesus. Have you received it too?

A Sunday School teacher had just concluded her lesson and wanted to make sure she had made her point. She said, "Can anyone tell me what you must do before you can obtain forgiveness of sin?" There was a short pause and then, from the back of the room, a small boy spoke up. "Sin," he said.

Well, for the most part, we have got it down! We probably do not have to worry about if we have done our part. Now trust God to do what God does. Your sins are forgiven!

AMEN