

St. John's Episcopal Church
Jackson, Wyoming
Sermon for March 22, 2015 ~ Lent 5B
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

British scientist and atheist Richard Dawkins rails against religion, and exhorts his audience not only to challenge religious people but also to “ridicule and show contempt” for their doctrines and sacraments.

At the other end of the spectrum is Christian Broadcasting Network host Pat Robertson, who told viewers in a recent broadcast that they should quit their jobs if they work with Buddhists because Buddhism is like a “disease” and that Christians could get “infected” if their coworkers practiced it.

Somewhere between these two harsh, dogmatic, judgmental extremes, there must lie a point of view – a theological environment – where mercy, grace, and forgiveness can find expression in the lives of people who desire to live in a holy and redemptive relationship with God and their neighbors. Our readings for today offer us hope for such a place!

As we continue to search the scriptures during this Lenten season to rediscover who we are, our readings for today tell us in beautiful ways that we are indeed heirs of God’s mercy and grace – we are a forgiven people.

But, as Mr. Dawkins and Mr. Robertson have shown us, there is this problem we have with external and internal rules for living and, somehow, God’s forgiveness seems out of kilter with what we understand to be “sin.” On one hand, we don’t feel the need for forgiveness and so we block it. On the other hand, we’d rather be punished than pardoned.

There is nothing new about this problem. Very few gifts are more threatening than the gift of forgiveness. Let’s examine this threatening gift together.

Forgiveness is a threatening gift because we don’t always feel the need for it.

If I were to single one of you out and walk up to you in the hallway one Sunday morning and say, “N. I forgive you.” It would probably be puzzling to you unless you had wronged me and knew it. Only if you felt a deep need for my forgiveness would the gift of it mean something to you.

In the same way, my announcement in the words of the prophet Jeremiah that God “forgives [our] iniquity and will remember [our] sins no more” (Jeremiah 31:34) will not mean much to many of you. Until and unless there is a felt need – which we sometimes call contrition – there is an incompleteness in the communication. The announcement seems irrelevant. The gift seems inappropriate.

The reason the prophet’s words were remembered and preserved is that his hearers knew that they had wronged God and their neighbors. So, when he declared the forgiveness of sins, it was good news. It struck a responsive chord in them because they longed to be forgiven and restored to a right relationship with God. They deeply desired God’s mercy and grace. Their hearts were contrite.

King David felt contrition after the revelation of his affair with Bathsheba and the plot, which led to the death of her husband, Uriah the Hittite. David cried out for God’s forgiveness, “Create in me a clean

heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me...The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Ps. 51:11, 17).

Perhaps there is a shortage of contrition in our time. Perhaps we have grown so callous, so accustomed to injustice and evil, that we excuse ourselves and say, “Well, nobody’s perfect. Everybody else does it.” Forgiveness is nothing to any of us and is threatening when we hear about it if it means nothing or if we really don’t feel the need of it.

Forgiveness is a threatening gift because often we’d rather be punished.

A Ugandan pastor, speaking of the suffering of his people, explained that he understood their affliction as God’s punishment for their failure to abide by his law. In other words, he believed they deserved it.

There are many Americans today who find similar satisfaction in placing an objective law or set of ethical and cultural norms between themselves and God and their neighbors. God is seen in terms of certain moral and behavioral expectations that he has laid upon us. According to this view, whatever happens in our lives is understood as a consequence of our having fulfilled or failed to fulfill the divine rules.

Jeremiah struggled with this problem. It is the problem of understanding our relationship to God in terms of a transaction: *Quid pro quo* – if you do this, I’ll do that. We’d like to have everything about our relationship with God and our neighbors all mapped out in black and white so we can keep our account current. We want to pay our debt so if we do wrong, God, please punish us. This way, we can keep the upper hand. We can maintain our distance, our independence, our control, so long as we take our punishment.

Jeremiah rejected such thinking and called for a covenant “written on the heart.” It is a covenant that goes beyond rigid obedience to all the rules. It is a covenant that we internalize. We know in our heart of hearts that we deserve to be punished. We do not deserve God’s grace. But if we deserved it, it would not be grace – it would be a reward. Forgiveness is threatening because it is not what we deserve and we know that we can never repay the debt.

Forgiveness is a threatening gift because if we accept it, we’ll have to give up old ways.

Jesus taught us to pray, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” That means to forgive us in the same way and to the same extent that we forgive others. The more forgiving we are, the more we will be forgiven and the more that forgiveness will matter in our lives. So, if we open up to God’s forgiveness, we are aware that we will have to be more forgiving ourselves.

One of the most powerful lessons for me has been Corrie Ten Boom’s account of her own struggle with forgiveness in her book, *The Hiding Place*. She tells the story of her life, her experience in concentration camps during the Second World War, and her experience with the God of grace. Near the end of the book, she describes an encounter she had after the war during one of her speaking engagements. She writes, “It was in a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And, suddenly, it was all there, the room full of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie’s pain-blanching face.”

“He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing: “How grateful I am for your message, fraulein,” he said. “To think that, as you say, he has washed my sins away.”

“His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people in Bloemendaal the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.”

“Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man: was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.”

“I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness.”

“As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.”

“And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world’s healing hinges, but on God’s. When Jesus tells us to love our enemies, he gives, along with the command, the love itself.”

God’s forgiveness threatens the old way of life we find so secure because it calls us and frees us for new life. Like Abram, we are beckoned to set forth in faith. And, as Melchizedek met him on his journey and blessed him, so Jesus, our Great High Priest, meets us on our journey and blesses us, placing his nail scarred hands on us, promising righteousness and peace. If we will allow ourselves to be drawn to him and exalt him as the sovereign of our life, not only will we transcend the threat of his forgiveness, he will use us to draw others to him.

Somewhere in between the harsh extremes of Richard Dawkins and Pat Robertson lies a haven of blessing and place of peace. It is the realm where God’s reign is experienced through God’s mercy and grace, inviting us to be a forgiven people who are learning to live with that threatening gift, to receive it, to celebrate it, and to share it as generously with others as it has been shared with us. It is my hope and prayer that this and every Episcopal Church will be an outpost of that gracious realm.