

So far this Lent, we have considered standing up and choosing the way of Christ. Over the next three Sundays, we are looking at the implications and obligations that such a choice brings with it by consideration of Forgive, followed by Embrace and Change.

There are two aspects to the concept of forgiveness – between God and us, and among each other. We will be speaking more about the issue of people forgiving people in a couple of weeks, on the Fifth Sunday of Lent. Today, we are starting with the interplay between divine and human.

I had a friend in law school who had worked in the oil industry overseas as security before returning to school. His job was more of an enforcer, keeping the locals in line to the benefit of the multi-national companies operating there. He had a crisis of conscience and quit, yet he still carried tremendous guilt. During a conversation with him, I assured him that God would forgive him, no matter what he did. He responded that he was not worried (or particularly interested) in God's forgiveness, since the real issue was that he could not forgive himself. A great deal of pain, fear, and hopelessness can get tangled up in the idea of forgiveness.

Most of us, if not all of us, grew up with the concept of sin. St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas defined as "an utterance, a deed, or a desire contrary

to the eternal law." I clearly remember being in line for confession in grade school thinking up something to tell the priest, because it was expected of us fourth graders to have committed enough sins in the past month to require forgiveness. I also recall accidentally going to communion twice on the same day – an old school Catholic no-no – and panicking as I ran to my teacher, desperately trying to keep the Host from dissolving in my mouth in case I had to spit it out, fearful that I had committed a serious sin.

We all have our own "sin stories." As adults, hopefully we recognize that God is not some kind of Hall Monitor, prowling around, looking for missteps and screw ups for which to punish us. But even if we intellectually know that this is not how God behaves, we all know that in times of stress, those childhood fears can leap to the fore.

Often in the Bible, sin and its forgiveness are described as a kind of debt. However, the image of debt is not the only, nor is it the oldest, way in which the Scriptures look at sin and forgiveness. The debt image comes into the Bible through the Aramaic language, originally from Persia. The Jewish people in the land of Israel, after the Babylonian Exile, adopted both Aramaic and its debt imagery. By the time of Jesus, Aramaic had replaced Hebrew as the local language.

And so, if sin was a kind of debt owed to God, then forgiveness was seen as the erasure of the debt by God.

Yet, originally, when Hebrew was the common language, sin and forgiveness generally were seen differently. There, sin was seen more as “missing the mark” as with shooting an arrow at a target. It was a failure to do something as it was meant to be done. Often the image for the consequence of sin is one of being burdened with a heavy load, or sometimes a stain on clothing. Forgiveness by God, then, consisted in removing the burden or cleaning the stain. We see this imagery in our first reading today, when the psalmist describes God as removing our transgressions to the far ends of the Earth. Over the past two millennia, the image of sin as a legal matter – breaking a law – has held sway. In modern times, sin has been viewed more psychologically, sometimes as a kind of addiction.

How we view sin influences how we view forgiveness – and God. Is God a judge, a creditor, or one who mercifully removes a heavy load from our shoulders?

Looking at today’s Gospel, we see an additional aspect of sin and forgiveness highlighted – the connection to health and wholeness. There is no doubt that people in biblical societies linked moral wrongdoing and illness. In John’s Gospel, when they come upon man who was born blind, the disciples ask

Jesus if this condition is a result of the man's own sin or that of his parents. For the record, Jesus says none of the above.

In our reading from today, a paralytic is healed, but Jesus insists that healing his body and forgiving his sins are just two ways of describing the same thing. Indeed, he seems to think that the real issue is one of spiritual health, not physical health. What are we make of this? Certainly, we do not believe that people contract cancer because they had an affair. Just as we do not accept the idea of literal impure spirits possessing people when the obvious condition the Scriptures describe are blindness, mental illness, or epilepsy, we do not consider personal sin to be the cause of illness.

And yet...

We recognize that our physical health can be affected by our mental health, and vice versa. There is no bright line of demarcation between mind and body. The human person is an integrated whole. Take it from someone who has experienced this link first hand. When I was deep into my addictive behavior, with so much to hide and lying to everyone around me, I began to experience cardiac symptoms. A trip to the ER revealed it was a panic attack. But the pain and heart palpitations were very real.

Always, we must remember that not all sin is personal and individual. There is such a thing as corporate sin, activity (or inactivity) that is pervasive in the world, in which we may or may not participate individually, but which causes tremendous harm to large numbers of people. Consider policies and actions that pollute the world, flood our towns and cities with dangerous drugs, support international arms trafficking, and create obscenely wide discrepancies in income, health care access, and availability of clean water, food, and housing.

Take the example over the past several years of what happened in Flint, Michigan and Jackson, Mississippi. Public water systems broke down. Lead was found in the water. Is failing to perform necessary upkeep on a water system sinful? It certainly causes medical problems for those exposed to such water.

It is not only physical harm that sinful activity can cause but also emotional and mental problems. Many young people suffer greatly due to a culture of bullying and mockery. A LGBTQ teen is more than four times as likely to take their own life as are other teens, and for teens who are not LGBTQ, suicide is the second or third most frequent cause of death, depending on the age of the teen.

So, God does not make us sick because we broke some rule, but it is clear that sinful activity can do harm to us nonetheless.

Which leads us back to our paralytic friend and the nature of divine forgiveness. First, we should recognize that that Jesus spoke about forgiveness a lot. The forgiveness of sins, and our forgiveness of others, is addressed in many sayings, actions, and parables. For Jesus, forgiveness was a priority. Second, for Jesus, forgiveness of sins is concerned with returning wholeness to a person, which explains in large part why forgiveness of sin often is linked to the restoration of physical health. In the case of the paralytic, Jesus will not treat his physical and his spiritual conditions as separate from one another, but as two sides of a coin.

Note also something that is true in every other story in the Gospels in which Jesus speaks of forgiving sin. Not once – not once – does he ask anyone if they are sorry, or what they have done. Not once. Forgiveness is given in most cases even if it is not requested.

Divine forgiveness is not conditional. It is not withheld until we show God that we are really sorry this time or perform some act of penance. No need to make an altar call and say the Jesus prayer. If we are suffering, if we are burdened, if we are broken, if we are embarrassed or lost or have just given up, God catapults our transgressions as far as the east is from the west.

Even if we do not ask. Notice in our Gospel story, the paralytic never speaks, never asks a thing. Perhaps we are to assume he could not, due to his condition. But what powerful symbolism for someone caught in the vise of sin and illness – someone utterly unable to move, trapped in their own body – a mind and spirit frozen in place. Forgiveness and health come to this man, not because of his own faith, but because of the faith of his friends.

Divine forgiveness does not come only to us as individuals, but as communities, as a whole people. The paralytic is healed, he is forgiven, he is made whole, because his friends were willing to carry him on a stretcher to the crowded house, up the stairs along the wall, onto the roof, dig through the roof, and lower him down to Jesus. It was their faith at work. Sometimes, it seems, divine forgiveness comes even to those who cannot ask for it themselves. All Jesus sees is a broken man and four good friends, and that's enough to make him whole.

We underestimate divine forgiveness – its scope, its depth, its reach, its persistence, its power. And, so, we underestimate God, and God's willingness to shove out of the way anything that separates us from God. God seeks intimacy with us, individually and corporately. God is not restricted by our sins and failings and fears; God does not wait for us to be worthy. For, as the psalmist in the first

reading today notes, God is aware that we are made of the earth, and cannot find our wholeness on our own.

So many of us have been trained through our religious upbringing to doubt God's mercy and eagerness to rush to our side and forgive our sins. We assume there is a catch, that this is all some kind of bait and switch. We imagine a God who would just love to help us, but, you know, there are rules about this sort of thing. What's God going to get out of forgiving us? Worship, recompense, an admission that God is right and we are wrong?

What God gets is us – whole, healed, safe, at peace. God gets a people who can get up, take their mat, and walk out of the place where they had been paralyzed, frozen, mute, and helpless. God gets a restored and, hopefully, strengthened relationship with us. Like any good parent, God gets the joy of watching us – the children of God – soar to new heights.

Divine forgiveness has one purpose. It's the same purpose Jesus speaks of in John's Gospel – to give us abundant life. To allow us to live with one another and within the Spirit of God – no longer ruled by fear and guilt, defined by our worst moments and choices, but free to grow, to start over, to lift ourselves and

others up into a new creation through and in the love of our God, who never shames us, never leaves us, and never, ever gives up on us.