

October 6, 2019
17th Sunday after Pentecost
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Forgiving the Unforgivable

Exodus 32:7–14 (NIV84)

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. ⁸ They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’ ⁹ “I have seen these people,” the LORD said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰ Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.” ¹¹ But Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God. “O LORD,” he said, “why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³ Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.’” ¹⁴ Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Do you remember what you were doing about three months ago? Count it back in your head. We are in October now so three months takes us back to September, August, July. Could it be that at the beginning of July, you were watching fireworks or somehow celebrating Independence Day? It is not too difficult to think back three months and remember what you were doing on a special occasion. And while you might not think about it every day, you still remember that you live in the United States of America. You don’t suddenly forget about July 4th and think that you are under the rule of Great Britain.

It had been about three months since the Lord brought the children of Israel out of Egypt. Three months ago was their day of independence, their day of rescue. The people had been slaves for generations and three months ago they walked out of Egypt toward a land of their own. And they didn’t walk away empty handed. The Egyptians gave them gold and silver and clothing to leave Egypt. About three months ago they crossed the Red Sea on dry land with a wall of water on their left and on their right. If you watched fireworks three months ago, I’m sure it was a nice show. But it was nothing compared to what the Israelites had seen and experienced three months before our account for today. The Lord’s mighty hand was on full display to rescue them. Surely no one could forget.

The Lord gave them even more reasons to remember him and love him. While they marched through the wilderness, the Lord provided water from a rock, bread from heaven (manna) and quail to eat. He brought them to Mount Sinai where he gave them commandments. You know the First Commandment: You shall have no other gods. The full commandment from Exodus 20, that God spoke to the people from the mountain is:

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

And after God spoke these words, he soon had Moses ascend Mount Sinai to receive these words written on the stone tablets. But when Moses was on the mountain with the Lord, the first thing the people did was to break every part of the First Commandment. Moses had been gone for weeks and they begged for a god they could see to worship. So Aaron takes the gold, melts it down and makes an idol in the form of a calf. They have rejected and betrayed the Lord who saved them and turned to a false god in the pattern of the Egyptians who enslaved them. The Lord did everything for them. He loved them. They were his treasured possession out of all the nations. And as soon as Moses was out of sight, the people forgot about the Lord and turned to a false god.

These people deserve God's punishment. What they have done is almost unforgivable. It would be like a husband or wife abandoning a marriage to live with someone else three months after the wedding. How could someone do that?! But the Israelites did. The way the Lord addresses Moses shows how deeply the people have hurt the Lord: *Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt.*

Did you hear it? The Lord calls the people, "your people." These were the people the Lord loved and rescued but they are now Moses' people. Their idolatry has separated them from God. The special relationship they had as God's people has been destroyed by their sin. And God justly tells Moses what he could do because of the sin of the people: *Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.*

Maybe we can understand the Lord's anger over this sin of making a false god in the form of a golden calf and worshiping it. This is a conscious choice to betray the Lord who rescued them. Can we also see how the Lord could be angry with us because of our sin? Have we sinned in a similar way to the Israelites who made a golden calf to worship? The basic meaning of the word for sin in the Old Testament is to miss the mark. You shoot an arrow at the target and miss the mark. We all confess that we haven't been perfect. We have tried to obey God's commandments but have missed the mark. But the sin of worshiping the golden calf was more than missing the mark. They knew what the Lord said and purposely aimed at a different target.

We have been rescued from sin and death by our Lord Jesus Christ. We are his people and yet there are times when we take aim at the wrong target. The choice is before us to join with friends in filthy language or to control our tongue and we choose to forget about Jesus for a time. The choice is before us to be honest and accept negative consequences at home or at work or to lie and blame others to make ourselves look better. And we take aim at deception. The choice is there to stand firm on the Word of God when challenged by secular thinking and we take aim at compromise so people like us. The thing is, when we take aim at sin we hit it every time. God should disown us and start again with a people who will honor him at all times and obey his commands. We can say with the apostle Paul: *Christ Jesus came*

into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst (1 Timothy 1:15).

Praise the Lord that he forgives what we might consider unforgivable.

But Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God. “O LORD,” he said, “why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³ Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.’” ¹⁴ Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

The people have done what many would say is unforgivable. But Moses knows the Lord better than that. He boldly calls upon the Lord to keep his promises to his people. These are God’s people and the Lord relents after the intercession of Moses. The people are forgiven and restored to a right relationship with the Lord. He is their God and they are his people. There are consequences on this earth for their betrayal that you can read more about in Genesis 32 at home. But their sin is forgiven.

We have one who is better than Moses to plead for us. We have the Lord Jesus Christ himself. If you think you have done what is unforgivable, look to Jesus. His blood pleads with the Father for your forgiveness. Christ always aimed at the target of God’s commands and always hit the bulls eye. His innocent blood was offered on the cross to cover every sin, even the on purpose sinful choices we have made. Moses was a servant of God, but a sinful one. We have the sinless Son of God to plead for us. His blood is more precious than gold or silver. His blood can cover every sin even the sin of those who have worshiped other gods. We can rejoice to say with the apostle Paul: *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners* (1 Timothy 1:15). And our Lord rejoices with his holy angels when the lost sheep is found, when one sinner repents. For in Christ, God forgives what seems to be unforgivable.

How long has it been since your independence day? When did the Holy Spirit bring you into the family of God through faith in Christ? When were you first washed clean of all of your sins in baptism? Maybe it has been more than a few months ago. Maybe you don’t remember that day because it was so long ago or you were too young to remember it. May we learn from the Israelites that even the greatest acts of God for his people can be forgotten in a short time. Therefore, be in the Word to daily remind yourself of what Christ did to forgive you some 2,000 years ago. Be in the Word of God to daily remind yourself of what the Holy Spirit did to bring you to faith in Christ years or decades ago. Be in the Word regularly to remind yourself that God continues to forgive sinners through his Word and Sacraments. Don’t forget it.

Amen.