

Sins Forgiven and Forgotten

‘No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.’ Jeremiah 31:34

The Reverend Luther Zeigler
St. Paul Lutheran Church, Gloucester, MA
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What is the worst mistake you ever made? Or the most hurtful thing you ever said or did? Just take a moment and think about that question.

A few years ago, I attended a Lenten retreat for priests in Del Ray Beach, Florida. It was intended to serve as a time for renewal, a chance to get away to a beautiful place for a change of perspective, an opportunity to pray together with new friends but without the responsibilities of preaching or leading worship. Near the end of our retreat, after we had ample time to get to know and trust one another, our retreat leader gathered us in a circle for one last exercise. And the focus of the exercise was exactly the question I posed for you.

“Reflect back on your ministry,” she said to us, “and call to mind the worst mistake you made as a priest this past year.” At first I was somewhat alarmed by her line of questioning. “Surely,” I said to myself, “we can end our retreat on a more positive note than this!” But then I quickly could see where she was going. Lent, after all, is all about self-examination, it is about acknowledging the ways in which our lives have fallen short of God’s desire for us. Our retreat leader’s hope was that, now that we really trusted one another, we might be ready to open up to the experience of confession and absolution at a deeper level.

And so we went around the room sharing with one another our memories of mistakes made, and the regret we felt as a result. It was a powerful conversation. I’m prevented, of course, from sharing the confidential nature of what other people in that room revealed, but I can tell you what I said. Honestly, as my turn came, I wasn’t entirely sure what I was going to say, and then the words just came forth, as if they had been pent up for too long.

I was sitting in my office one morning at the Episcopal high school where I once served as chaplain getting ready for chapel. As I was preparing to leave for worship, I noticed that a note had been slipped under the closed door of my office. I

picked it up. The note, which was unsigned, said: “I just learned that John Smith’s grandmother died. Please pray for her soul, and for John, in chapel today.” It wasn’t at all unusual for me to get prayer requests like this before chapel from teachers or students, and often times they were anonymously written like this one was. Thinking nothing of it, I slipped the note in my pocket and headed off for chapel.

Chapel proceeded uneventfully, and when we got to the Prayers of the People, I dutifully included the requested prayer, announcing that John Smith’s grandmother had recently died, and inviting those gathered to pray for the repose of her soul, and that God might comfort John and his family as they mourn her passing.

As I said these words, I noticed an abrupt movement in the back of chapel, and sure enough I could see that it was John getting up out of his seat and heading quickly out of chapel. Not sure exactly what had happened, after chapel concluded, I went and searched for John. I ultimately found him sobbing in the corner of a hallway by himself. As I gently sought to comfort him, thinking that perhaps he was just overwhelmed by grief, what I learned to my horror was that his grandmother had in fact not died. The information I had been given was mistaken. When John heard my prayer in chapel, he assumed this was my way of breaking the news to him that his grandmother had died that morning. But then, when he called his parents immediately after he left chapel, he learned the truth: his grandmother, while ailing, was still hanging on to life. The author of the anonymous note had obviously been misinformed, and unwittingly I compounded and amplified the error.

Of course, I felt sick. I profusely apologized to John, and later to his parents, but the emotional harm had already been done. Yes, in one sense, John was relieved to learn that his grandmother was still alive, but for a young person to be put through the emotional turmoil of such a very public mistake, before all his friends in school, was a traumatic experience for a sensitive boy, who, I later learned, had a very close relationship with his grandmother. My intentions were good, to be sure, but I learned anew that day the emotional power that surrounds the reality of illness and death in our lives, and the importance of being scrupulously careful in how I, as a priest, care for people, especially vulnerable young people, as they experience the loss of a loved one. And, needless to say, I now always double-check information I receive about a death with the loved ones involved before I offer public prayers.

It was cathartic, of course, for me to share this story of good intentions gone badly awry with my fellow priests at our retreat, just as I’m sure it was cathartic for them to share their stories. Even though all of us were well-trained in the art of confession and absolution, experiencing this sacrament ourselves in the company of trusted friends was a humbling reminder of our own individual frailty, of the importance of bearing one another’s burdens, and of the depth of God’s loving

forgiveness when we do open our hearts. We concluded our exercise that day by pairing up with the person sitting next to us, and offering each other the ancient healing rite of the laying on of hands. As my partner gently placed her hands on my head, she uttered the familiar words of the Prayer Book's rite of healing and absolution, assuring me among other things that God through Christ had indeed forgiven my sin, but then she added these words: "and may you now live in the joyful conviction that God in Christ has wiped away and forgotten these sins of yours as if they had never happened."

As we were getting ready to leave our session, I thanked my friend for her words, but then asked: "You know, I've said the words of absolution many times, and believe fully in God's forgiveness, but no one has ever said to me that God is willing not only to forgive but *to forget* my mistakes as if they never happened." "Jeremiah 31:34," she said. "In the giving of the new covenant in Christ, God promises not merely to forgive our mistakes, but he goes one step further: he says he will 'remember them no more.'"

It's funny how we don't notice things in the Bible some times, even in texts well-known to us. Jeremiah 31, from which our first lesson this evening was taken, has long been a favorite of mine. In it, Jeremiah describes the new covenant God will make with his people, notwithstanding their past unfaithfulness. "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." With these words, Jeremiah teaches that God is determined to keep faith with His people even when they don't keep faith with Him. And He does so by putting His love in our hearts, not merely by giving us an external law to guide our conduct. Christians, of course, understand this prophecy of a new covenant as pointing toward the coming of Christ.

But, if you listen to Jeremiah carefully, God promises something more than just a new covenant written on our hearts: God seals this new covenant with the additional promise in verse 34: a promise *to forget* -- to forget all our past mistakes, to forget our betrayals, to forget our infidelities, to forget all of our screw-ups. "I shall remember your iniquity no more," God says. In his mercy, God does not just pass over, absolve, or forgive our sins. Out of pure and unconditional love, with the giving of this new covenant, God also promises to erase even the memory of our past wrongs from his eternal consciousness.

And lest you think this "promise to forget" our sins is just a stray verse from Jeremiah, you'll find this same promise echoed in Isaiah (43:25), as well as in the New Testament itself – in, for example, the Letter to the Hebrews (8:12 and 10:17).

I don't know about you, but the one thing I find nearly impossible to do is to forget the really bad things I have done, as well as the bad things that have been done to me. Often I am able to forgive, and move forward in a spirit of reconciliation, but rarely do I forget. The past has a way of haunting us. Yet, what we cannot do by ourselves, Christ does for us. When we come to Christ in genuine confession, He not only forgives our misdeeds, He also forgets them, offering us a completely fresh start. This is the beautiful mystery of Christ's healing presence.

So, as we continue our journey toward the Cross during this Lenten season, my hope and prayer is that you will find time to open your hearts in the spirit of honest and complete confession, trusting in the power of Christ's absolution. For the truly good news about Christ's forgiveness is that, when we faithfully confess our sins, whatever hurts we may have caused, whatever harms we may have done, whatever messes we may have made, all these things have not only been forgiven in and through Christ's mercy; *they have also been forever forgotten.* Amen.