

Grace That is Greater Than All our Sin: A Lenten Sermon

Exodus 3:1-15

Psalm 103

I Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9



When I was a doctoral student at the University of Notre Dame, there was a less than charitable joke among the graduate students about one of the the priests at the local church many of us attended – that he had only two sermons, a love sermon and a sin sermon, that he was for the first and against the second, and he would preach one or the other every Sunday. If I were that priest this morning, the readings would leave me with a dilemma. I could preach my love sermon, in which case I would preach on the Old Testament readings. Or I could preach my sin sermon, in which case I would preach on the New Testament readings. But I couldn't preach on both.

However, if I am going to be responsible to my task as preacher, I think I need to be honest with the readings the lectionary gives me. That means I have to preach on both. And

I have to ask how what the Bible says about love is connected to what the Bible says about God's judgment of sin – because that's what the passages are about. My starting point will be Psalm 103, where we find a clue in the Hebrew word *hesed*, which is usually translated in English as “loving kindness” or “steadfast love” and appears several times in the Psalm. The Psalm begins: “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!” It continues in verse 4, “who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy.” In verse 8, “The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” In verse 11, “As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him.” In verse 17, “The steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him.” This word translated “steadfast love” is not the sentimental love of pop ballads: “What the world needs now is love, sweet love, It's the only thing that there's just too little of.” Or the Beatles' “All you need is love.” It is certainly not what our culture currently means by “tolerance” or “inclusiveness.”

Hesed is a word that is closely connected with the Hebrew word *berit*, which is translated “covenant.” *Hesed* is the brotherly companionship or loyalty that one partner in a covenant owes to the other. In 1 Samuel 20:8, David asks Jonathan to “deal kindly” with him because the two have entered a covenant of friendship with one another. In turn, Jonathan asks David to show “steadfast love” to his family after the Lord vanquishes David's enemies.

This morning's Exodus reading is the classic biblical passage in which God speaks to Moses from the burning bush, and gives his name as “I am.” The word translated “loving kindness” does not appear in the passage, but it is the clear motivation in God's delivering of Israel from slavery: “Then the LORD said, ‘I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them

out of the hand of the Egyptians.” (Exodus 3:7-8). Psalm 103 draws the connection between God’s “steadfast love” to his covenant with Israel and the Exodus events: “The LORD works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed. He made know his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.” (Ps. 103:6). “The steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him . . . to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.” (Ps. 103:17-18).

In contemporary secular culture, the biblical God is often portrayed as a kind of cosmic bully. The “new atheists” seem to think that the God of the Bible is something like a mafiosi godfather who imposes a bunch of unreasonable and arbitrary demands on rather stupid and obsequious religious people who do what they’re told mainly out of fear of punishment. This God is always angry, and his favorite hobby is taking out his anger on those who step out of line. There’s even a popular expression that shows the prevalence of this view. If you get angry with someone else and take your anger out on that someone in a manner that is way out of proportion with their offense, it is said that you are “going Old Testament” on him or her. Many of our contemporaries want nothing to do with such a God who is always “going Old Testament” on people who are just minding their own business. And really, who could blame them?

But such an understanding says more about the prevalence of biblical illiteracy in our culture than it says about the God of the Bible. The story that we read in Exodus 3 tells us something about who this God is. This is the God who delivers an oppressed people from slavery. This is the God whose name means “I will be with you,” and who tells Moses, “when you have brought the people out of Egypt you shall serve God on this mountain.” (Exodus 3:7-12). This is the God who promises to lead this people into a land “flowing with milk and honey” (v. 17).

Hesed describes not only God's love toward his people, but also their expected response to that love. When God delivers Israel from slavery, and makes a covenant with them, he not only creates a people. He gives them a law, and that law is itself a gift of his loving kindness, a sign of God's grace. In giving the Ten Commandments, God commits himself to his people based on his gift of freedom in rescuing them from slavery: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." (Ex. 20:2). God identifies himself with covenant love when he gives to Moses the stone tablets on which the commandments are written: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty." (Exodus 34:6:-7). God's law indicates the kind of behavior expected of those who are partners in the covenant. They are to love their God who has delivered them from oppression as he has loved them. They are to love their fellow Israelites, and even the non-Israelite sojourners who live among them. Is it any wonder that African Americans who were enslaved in this country understood so well who this God was and what he was about?

When Israel was in Egypt's land: Let my people go,
Oppress'd so hard they could not stand, Let my People go.
Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go.

It is this sense of covenant partnership that explains how the Old Testament talks about sin. Sin is not simply wrong-doing, the breaking of a list of rules, but it is the violation of the covenant. Sin is ingratitude. It is a failure on the part of the covenant people to return *hesed* with *hesed*. It is to forget what God has done for his people. As the Book of

Deuteronomy puts it so well: "Take care lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. . . And if you forget the Lord your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish." (Deut. 8:11-14, 19).

There is indeed judgment for those who forget God's kindness toward them, who break this covenant by not loving God or their neighbor. The covenant contains both blessing and curse, and Leviticus 26 contains a long list of the curses that will strike those who break the LORD's covenant. But again, it is God's "loving kindness," his "steadfast love" that provides the context even for God's judgment on sin. The purpose of judgment is not to destroy Israel, but to bring them to repentance, to bring those who have forgotten, who have wandered from the covenant, back into the presence of God's loving kindness. This is a central theme in Psalm 103: "Bless the LORD . . . who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases. . . . The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities . . . as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us." (Psalm 103: 3, 8-10, 12).

This theme of covenant love follows through in the New Testament. There is no exact New Testament equivalent to the Hebrew word *hesed*, but there are a couple of words that cover the same territory. The first is *agape*, translated "love," or,

in the King James version, "charity." In the New Testament, the covenant themes of the Old Testament are universalized to talk about God's salvation of not only Israel from slavery in Egypt, but of all humanity, both Jew and Gentile. And the deliverance is not a deliverance merely from physical oppression, but from the cause of all oppression, sin itself. God's steadfast love, his loving kindness, his "charity," is demonstrated primarily in the gift of his Son Jesus. There was a time when every Sunday school child knew by heart what is likely the most famous verse in the Bible: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son . . ." (John 3:16).

The second New Testament equivalent to *hesed* is *pistis*, which is usually translated "faith," but can also be translated "fidelity" or "faithfulness." For the apostle Paul, the great sin of both Jews and Gentiles, is "unfaithfulness" (*apistia*), not simply in the sense of "unbelief," but in the sense of a lack of trust in God's goodness and his promises. In Romans 1 and 2, Paul describes the sins of both Gentiles and Jews in a manner that points back to the covenant commandments delivered at Sinai. Gentiles are guilty of idolatry, "serving the creature rather than the Creator" (Rom. 1:25), and of failing to love their fellow human beings: "They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness" (Rom. 1:29). In particular, Paul speaks of the failure of Israel as lack of faith or fidelity, in contrast to God's faithfulness. In Romans 3:4, he writes, "What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?" What does it say about our own increasingly secularized culture that it is more and more characterized by distrust, suspicion, and cynicism? A culture that will not trust in God's goodness ends up trusting in nothing and no one.

Since human beings have failed to keep covenant faithfulness, the New Testament portrays God as having taken that task on himself. Where we were faithless, God was faithful. God keeps faithfulness when neither Jew nor Gentile kept his covenant

law by establishing a new covenant, by giving Jesus his Son to atone for our faithlessness, and Jesus' faithfulness to his Father leads to human salvation and deliverance from sin. As the Son of God incarnate, Jesus is both God come among us, and the one human being who keeps covenant with his Father by being faithful. He is the beloved Son in whom the Father is well pleased (Mark 1:11, 9:7). He is the one faithful Israelite who responds to temptation in the desert by appealing to the words of the law, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." and "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve." (Matt. 4:4,10). There is perfect harmony between Jesus' actions and the Father's will: "Truly, truly, I say to you the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does that the Son does likewise." And that perfect harmony is rooted in God's *hesed* love: "For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing." (John 5:19-20).

The focal point of New Testament *hesed* is the cross. Paul writes that "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom. 5: 8). Philippians 2:6-11 is the quintessential passage that shows the harmony between the Father's faithful love and the Son's faithful obedience: "Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing . . . being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

Justification by faith means being incorporated into Christ's death and resurrection, and thereby sharing in his faithfulness and obedience in response to the divine love that suffered even death on a cross for us. Faith in Christ, for Paul, does not mean only belief or even simply trust, but also faithfulness. Sanctification or holiness is about union with Christ, following Christ, being disciples of Christ – being

conformed to his death and resurrection. That Christ has died does not mean that we will not. To the contrary, we have been crucified with Christ so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. As Paul writes: "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." (Rom. 6:1-4).

It is perhaps significant that the key metaphor Paul uses in discussing Christian holiness is that of delivery from slavery. Those who sin are slaves to sin. We who were once slaves to sin have now been set free from sin, and become slaves of righteousness. I cannot help but think that Paul's analogy between sin and slavery has the Old Testament narrative in mind here. At the Exodus, God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt so that Israel might serve God in the promised land. Jesus Christ now delivers us from slavery to sin so that we might become slaves of righteousness. Again Paul writes: "But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life." (Rom. 6:22).

Despite human unfaithfulness, God has maintained his loving kindness toward the human race, his *hesed*, and has himself been faithful to his own promises by meeting our unfaithfulness with faithfulness. On the cross, Jesus endured the full cost of our unfaithfulness, when those who crucified him violated both aspects of the covenant, loving neither God nor neighbor. Because of Jesus' faithfulness, we who were once unfaithful have now been enabled once again to be faithful by being united to Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. As Paul writes "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, and the life I

now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal. 2:20).

Logically, then, it makes no sense for those who have been baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection to continue to sin. And yet we do. Both of our New Testament passages remind us that God’s covenant people can be unfaithful. In Luke 13, Jesus responds to some of his fellow Jews who were apparently shocked about an incident in which the Gentile Pontius Pilate had massacred a group of Galileans, apparently within the sacred grounds of the Jerusalem temple – forbidden to Gentiles – so that their own blood was mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. Jesus response was certainly not what we might expect: ““Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” (Luke 13:2-3). In the parable of the barren fig tree that follows, Jesus clearly has in mind a coming judgment on God’s covenant nation of Israel (Luke 13:6-9).

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul gives a warning to the church of Corinth by drawing a typological comparison to events that happened to the nation of Israel after they were delivered from slavery in the Exodus and the church today. Paul makes a clear analogy to the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist: “All were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.” (1 Cor. 10:2-4). As the church shares in the death and resurrection of Christ through baptism and the eucharist, so Israel ate the spiritual food of manna, and drank the water from the rock, which Paul suggests, typologically pointed to Christ. Nonetheless, Paul points out, most of those who shared in the Exodus events perished in the wilderness. And Paul finds a warning here for Christians. We are not to be idolaters, as some of them were, nor engage in sexual sin, as some of them did, nor grumble, as

some of them did (1 Cor. 10:6-10). Paul's implication is that judgment is still a very real possibility, even for followers of Christ. What are we to make of these two passages?

I would suggest that these two passages make sense in the context of what Scripture teaches about God's covenant and *hesed* loving kindness. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament presume that God's covenant has a partner. God takes the initiative in the covenant, but he does not save us without us. In the Exodus, God rescues Israel from Egypt, but Israel has to walk out of Egypt. When Pharaoh's army pursues Israel at the Reed Sea, God splits the water, but Israel has to walk through to the other side. In the desert, God is with Israel in a pillar of cloud and fire, but God leaves the first generation who came out of Egypt in the desert because of their sin – their lack of faithfulness to the covenant.

The two New Testament passages make sense as examples of violations of the *hesed* faithfulness of the covenant. In the gospel passage, Jesus preaches possible judgment against Israel because Israel has been faithless. In 1 Corinthians, Paul notes parallels between the sins of the Corinthian church and the sins of Israel after the Exodus. If the faith in Christ by which we are justified is faithfulness, so continuing to abide in sin is faithlessness. Sin can only be a paradoxical possibility for the Christian. In the cross, God in Christ has given himself to us in order to bring us back into covenant. To have faith in Christ is to share in that friendship with God that flows from this self-giving. To have faith in Christ and yet to continue to walk in sin is the contradiction of claiming to have faith in Christ and yet being faithless to Christ. It is to refuse God's self-giving. It is to forget that we have been delivered from sin. Such unfaithfulness is its own judgment because it contradicts that renewed friendship with God that has been bought with the price of Christ's blood.

Sin in the life of Christians is a dreadful incoherence.

During Lent, we as a church are called to reflect on the extent to which we have forgotten God's faithfulness by failing to trust, by being unfaithful. It may be a dreadful incoherence, but it is something we all do. As we confess in the words of the *Book of Common Prayer*: "We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone." The confession is there for a reason. The purpose of confession is not to drive us to despair, to cause us to quake in fear of God's judgment. Rather, the point of confession is to enable us to remember what we have forgotten about God's goodness so that we might return to the presence of the God of *hesed*, of loving kindness. God calls us to repentance because he cares for us, and the confession calls us to run to his arms. In one of his sermons, the nineteenth-century Scottish writer George MacDonald suggests that no one is condemned for sins that are past. Rather we are condemned because we will not come to the light that has come to us. ("The Truth in Jesus," *Unspoken Sermons*, Series II.) The first passage that is read in the traditional "comfortable words" of the *Book of Common Prayer* following the words of confession and absolution is Jesus' summons: "COME unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you." (Matt. 11:28). It is only Jesus whose faithfulness can heal our unfaithfulness.

Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits,
who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
He will not always chide,
nor will he keep his anger forever.
He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;

as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.
As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.
For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust.

Psalm 103:2-14