

SIMPLY AMAZING

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Sunday, June 28, 2015

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

God Checks the Line at the Gates

There's an old story about a time when there had been a lot of deaths in one particular week, and so there was a backup of applicants at the Pearly Gates. Saint Peter was processing the people as fast as he possibly could, but despite his frantic efforts there nevertheless was a long line.

One guy was impatiently standing in line with many dozens people ahead of him when another guy in a white lab coat and a stethoscope around his neck walked right by everyone, all the way up to the front of the line. He nodded to Saint Peter, and just walked right on in past those sainted gates.

The guy in line became sort of upset as his level of impatience rose more than seemly for a person waiting to enter heaven. It's just like, seriously, doesn't everybody have to check in with Saint Peter? Can some people just waltz right through the Pearly Gates with no paperwork or anything?

He was still stewing about this affront, more than a little upset, when he finally got up to the Pearly Gates. Impertinently he mentioned this slight to Saint Peter. "Really? Do some people get a free pass and just go straight in?"

Saint Peter gently replied, "Oh, no, no, no. That was God. God likes to play doctor now and then."

The Whole Purpose of This Sermon . . .

. . . Is to take seriously for once a Bible verse that we usually slide right over. It comes at the end of the passage from John, right before Thomas says, "By the way I'm not going to believe a darn thing until I get a chance to put my finger in the holes in Jesus' body." But then Jesus says,

"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.' And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' "

And here's the significant sentence:

"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.' "

So it is Jesus who gives this notion of forgiveness to people. That thought is deeply questioned by some scholars. Let me give you an example. In the Gospel of John, there are two different statements by Jesus that are seemingly at odds with each other.

In one he says,

"I am the light of the world."

And elsewhere, he says,

“*You* are the light of the world.”

If you look up those passages, you will find an incredible amount of resources available to preach on, including musical selections you can choose from regarding *Jesus* being the light of the world. But where it says, “*You* are the light of the world,” there’s darn near nothing. And there’s no piece of music I’ve ever been able to find on that version of the text. It’s completely ignored.

What we have below is something very similar, in which the scribes complain that only God can do the forgiving. But the following passage comes from right at the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, second chapter, the first few verses:

“When he [Jesus] returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them.

“Then some people came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay.

“When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’ ”

Now the Plot Thickens

“Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ‘Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is

blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?’

At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves, and he said to them, ‘Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’?

“ ‘But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’ – he said to the paralytic – ‘I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.’ And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this!’ ”

So that’s a typical story. I had three or four different ones to choose among throughout the gospels to give you an example of the way in which it is God who is the one who forgives sins, not individual people.

And then, right at the end of the Gospel of John, Jesus says,

“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

A Family Story

In my family there was once a very divisive issue between my mom and one of my sisters. This was something like twenty years ago. I can’t remember what it was about, but she said something that deeply offended my mom.

My other sister and I have heard both sides of the story over and over again, and it's one of those things that can be interpreted in different ways. The offending sister swears she didn't mean it in a negative way. But my mom, saintly mom, never forgave her.

This caused a coldness in their relationship that lasted until my mom died. I didn't mention it at the funeral, but it was one of those things that happened in my family, and that can happen in every family all over the world.

If you hold onto a sin, by golly it's held onto. If you can let it go, you can relieve yourself of a heavy burden.

The Phantom Lusts for His Protégée

One of the best examples of this principle of letting go versus holding on comes from a scene toward the end of the movie *Phantom of the Opera*, which came out a number of years ago. Gerard Butler plays the part of the Phantom, the lovesick tutor of the ingénue; Emmy Rossum is Christine Daaé, the soprano lead; and Patrick Wilson plays her fiancé, Viscount Raoul de Chagny.

There's a dramatic scene toward the end that I'd like to describe for you:

What has happened at this point is that the giant chandelier in the grand old Paris opera house has been sent crashing down by the Phantom after having been unmasked by Christine to reveal his appalling deformities in front of the screaming audience.

The gas-lit chandelier has set the opera house on fire, and it is fast burning to the ground. The Phantom snatches Christine,

his protégée and the object of his twisted love, and he makes a get-away with her to his lair far beneath beneath the opera house.

Raoul, Christine's jealous fiancé, follows them deep down into the lair, where the Phantom is trying to get Christine to marry him by making her don a wedding style of dress. When Raoul comes along, the Phantom captures him and binds him to a metal gate. Then he puts a rope around the Viscount's neck and threatens to kill him if Christine refuses to marry him.

A Hobbsian Choice

Christine is forced to make a choice: Marry the Phantom or else her fiancé, Raoul, will be killed then and there. Despairingly she sings:

“The tears I might have shed for your dark fate broke hold and turned to tears of hate.”

Then comes one of the most amazing scenes I've ever seen in a movie. If I were more highbrow, I would say it's in the play or the book, but no, I saw it in the movie. It's incredible. Accompanied by the same music, all three are singing at the same time, Christine from her point of view, Raoul from his, and the Phantom from his. When it comes to the point of no return, Christine, who had fallen under the spell of the Phantom, sings with great pity:

“You deceived me. I gave my mind blindly.”

The Phantom vocalizes back to her:

“You try my patience. Make your choice!”

The Extraordinary Climax

With a heavy heart, Christine sings, very softly at first:

“Pitiful creature of darkness, what kind of life have you known? God give me courage to show you, you are not alone.”

And then she wades out into the water of an underground lake. It’s evocative. Is this a wedding scene, with the water representing life? Is it a baptismal scene, and the water represents dying to the old and emerging into the new? In the same way that the three were singing different lines to one another, so the symbols flow and intertwine.

Now at the climax, the three of them are standing there in the water, the Phantom holding the rope, Raoul bound on the other end, and Christine in her beautiful wedding-style dress. She then kisses the Phantom long and well, not merely a peck on the cheek.

The kiss broke the scene on a note of forgiveness, a note of grace. Suddenly the Phantom can’t go through with it anymore. Having received that bit of tenderness, that bit of grace, that bit of compassion, that bit of light in the darkness, it broke his will. It broke the threat.

The Phantom begins to sob. He goes to Raoul, removes the noose from his neck, and unchains him. Raoul is speechless. Then the Phantom abruptly flees as the mob, bent on revenge, charges down into the lair.

Pieces of the opera house, burning wood, and paper and cloth are falling in the water

as the opera house burns. Finally the lynch-ready mob bursts upon the scene looking for the Phantom.

One more detail: Christine is named after Christ. It is not coincidental that her character was given that name so as to assume a messianic role in the plot of the play. She is the Christ figure. It is ironic that the movie role was played by Emmy Rossum. “Emmy” is short for “Emanuel.”

We’re All Playing God

The reason I told you the joke at the beginning of the sermon – that lame joke about God playing doctor – is that, if you take the scripture seriously, what you retain, you retain, and what you let go is let go. What it means is that we’re all playing God. Except we’re not playing.

In the same way that Jesus is the light of the world and you are the light of the world, God forgives, and so do you. And if you forgive, you in turn are forgiven. We should take that text seriously.

I submit to you that, if you look at any given conflict in the world, if you look at any given conflict in a family, you can trace it back to something being retained in the heart of one person holding a grudge against another. It is in the heart of one nation against another.

Whether it’s Jews and Germans or Laos and Southeast Asia and Vietnam, or Tibet and China and Taiwan, you can choose the place. You can choose the family. It doesn’t matter. You can trace it back to a sin, a slight, a hurt being held onto and retained. But if you let it go, the sin is gone.

One final observation about that text in John:

“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

The sentence right before that is:

“When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’ ”

Are you having trouble forgiving?
Having trouble letting go of what has happened to you unfairly?

The Holy Spirit is the gift of God entering the hearts of every one of us to give us the power to do what is sometimes very hard to do alone.

Call upon the Holy Spirit.

Amen.