

“Yes. Practice Forgiveness”

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

Lent is forty days of reflection and preparation before the celebration of Easter that begins on Ash Wednesday. By observing Lent, Christians focus on Jesus’ baptism, temptation in the wilderness and his earthly obedience. Lent is marked by lament, fasting, forgiveness, confession of sin and repentance. Today is the Fourth Sunday in Lent.

For God so loved... Laura Hillenbrand, author of *Unbroken*, a story of World War II survival, resilience, and redemption recounts the story of World War II veteran and prisoner-of-war survivor Louis (or Louie) Zamperini.

On May 27, 1943, Zamperini’s bomber left Oahu in search of survivors from a downed plane. About 800 miles from the base one of the engines cut out and the bomber plunged into the ocean. Zamperini and another soldier would stay afloat on a tiny life raft for 47 days—a world record for survival at sea. After confronting sharks, starvation, and dementia, their real battle would begin. Zamperini spent the next two years as a Japanese POW in the notorious Sugamo Prison. In particular, a guard named Watanabe (nicknamed “the Bird”) ensured that Louis endured constant physical torture and verbal humiliation—all in an attempt to shatter the spirit of the American soldiers. After his release and return to America, Zamperini’s life quickly descended into a new self-made prison of alcoholism and bitterness. In particular, Louis now endured constant nightmares about his past and an obsessive drive to murder “the Bird.” But the walls of addiction and hatred started to crumble in 1949 when Louis attended a Billy Graham crusade and heard the gospel and trusted Christ... When [Louie] thought of his history, what resonated with him now was not all that he had suffered but the divine love that he believed had intervened to save him. He was not the worthless, broken, forsaken man that the Bird had striven to make him. In a single, silent moment, his rage, his fear, his humiliation, and helplessness, had fallen away. That morning, he believed, he was a new creation.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Adapted from preachingtoday.com as submitted by Van Morris from Mt. Washington, Kentucky (12/20/10).

A year after trusting Christ, Zamperini returned to the Sugamo Prison in Japan where he met with his former captors, except the Bird. When Louis was told that the Bird had committed suicide, in Hillenbrand's words, "[Louie] felt something he had never felt for his captor before. With a shiver of amazement, he realized it was compassion. At that moment, something shifted sweetly inside him. It was forgiveness, beautiful and effortless and complete. For Louie Zamperini, the war was over."<sup>2</sup> Forgiveness is a gift from God to humanity. John M. Perkins writes, "Forgiveness is the linchpin of reconciliation. It is the soil in which reconciliation takes root and grows."<sup>3</sup> Receiving and giving forgiveness is the key to the healing. Forgiveness is the bridge to reconciliation.

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22, Ephesians 2:1-10 and John 3:14-21 proclaim that God's goodness, love, mercy, grace and forgiveness is immeasurable.

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22 asserts that although God grieves over faithlessness, God's steadfast love offers redemption, healing and forgiveness. Psalm 107:17, 19 reads "Some were sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities endured affliction... Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress."

Ephesians 2:1-10 states that the "saved, the redeemed," should tell others of how their lives were brought back from the pit of despair, depression and destruction.

Ephesians 2:10 reads, "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

---

<sup>2</sup>Laura Hillenbrand, *Unbroken* (Random House, 2010), 379.

<sup>3</sup>John M. Perkins, *One Blood* (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Publishers, 2018), 99.

John 3:14-21 focuses on the extravagant love of God that we experience through forgiveness. We need to ponder the saving act of God. Yes, through the dispensing and receiving of forgiveness a new reality for living is possible. Forgiveness, giving and receiving it, brings about the condition of being “born again.” Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council, came to Jesus by night. He asked Jesus how one could be born again, a feat that Nicodemus could not get his mind around. Jesus engaged Nicodemus in the extravagant love of God. Whoever believes in Jesus will not bear the fruit of their condemnation but will be “born again.” Being born of the Spirit negates condemnation having the last word. Anger, hate, greed, and pride will not have the last word. John 3:20-21 reads, “For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”<sup>4</sup>

Say YES to love. Say YES to forgiveness. Again, John M. Perkins writes, “Whether we need to give forgiveness to the persons who have offended us, or whether we are in need of receiving forgiveness God commands us to move from these places where we’ve been stuck. Whether we’ve been stuck for a short time or for generations, His [God’s] command is that we move.”<sup>5</sup> We need to forgive. Forgiveness heals.

As a mainline denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA) is on the cutting edge of change. On this Fourth Sunday in Lent be reminded to focus on building

---

<sup>4</sup>In the four paragraphs of textual analysis above, I have benefited from the thinking of Kimberly R. Wagner, Jerry L. Sumney, Anna M. V. Bowden, Diane G. Chen and David Dark in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year B, Volume 2* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 81-82, 83-85, 85-86, 87-89 and 89-90.

<sup>5</sup>John M. Perkins, *One Blood*, 105.

congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism and eradicating systemic poverty.  
Forgive. Confess. Repent. Break down the walls that separate you from others. My  
friends, say yes to practice forgiveness. Amen.

*This sermon was preached (Livestream due to the Coronavirus) on Sunday, 14 March 2021  
by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh in the Sanctuary at  
Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California*

Copyright © 2021  
Steven M. Marsh  
All rights reserved.