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Title: This Is Us: Forgiven

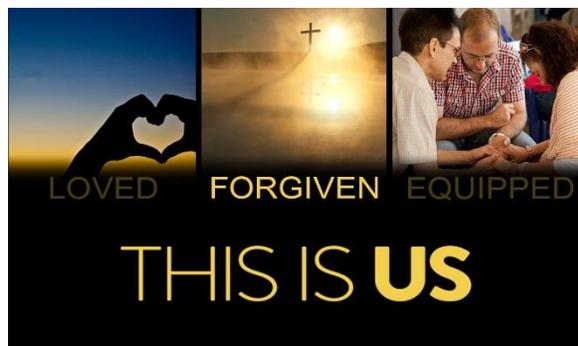
Date: August 13, 2017

Preaching: Senior Associate Minister Ryan Hazen

Scripture: [Romans 3:21-26](#)

Text: [Ephesians 2:1-10](#)

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Last week, we began a three-week sermon series entitled THIS IS US. Our motivation for the title of the series comes from the hit NBC TV series of the same name. The show deals with the real stuff of human day to day life that defines us – relationships, race and racism, obesity, prestige, finances, and much more. It is from this search

for identity in our own lives that we are reminded that we also search for our identity as Christians. This series is about that – the things that tell others that we follow Christ. We’ve boiled it down to three overarching points on which we can hang our hat – it is oversimplified but still, I believe, correct - we are loved (that’s where we started last week), we are forgiven and we are equipped.

Last week, we talked about the importance of identity and identification. Almost every person carries some form of government issued photo ID. Identification is important. IDs tell others who we are. We mentioned driver’s licenses, passports, student ID’s but one I forgot was military ID numbers. Every veteran I know is still able to rattle off their ID number no matter how many years they’ve been away from active service. Even our name tags at church are a form of ID.

We said last week that how you see yourself has an awful lot to do with how you live your life. When we understand who we are in the light of God, it transforms how we see just about everything else. Knowing how our identity as Christians shapes us – knowing how God sees us - is a critical starting point for knowing how we live as children of God. Christian identity starts with the fact that we are loved. When you think no one else in the whole world loves you, you are still loved. You are loved by someone who is the very definition of love. That fact is the bedrock of our identity and NOTHING in all of creation can separate you from that love. That was last week.

This week, the second point essential to Christian identity is that YOU ARE FORGIVEN. Forgiveness is likely the hardest of the three points to fully grasp. That difficulty comes from two things. The first is that what God has done for us must get translated into what we offer to others. There is God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others so we have to be clear about which we are speaking. The other reason this is difficult is because forgiving others is difficult. Forgiving is not in our nature – revenge and retribution and getting even until we have the upper hand is in our nature but forgiveness – not so much – the world says that forgiving someone means that we are weak.

First, let me define forgiveness so that we have a common working definition. Merriam-Webster says that this intransitive verb means "to give up resentment of" and "to grant release from payment of a debt" and "to cease to feel resentment against an offender."¹ When we profess that Jesus is our Lord and Savior, we imply that we also profess that Jesus went to the cross on our behalf and through that selfless act, our sins are forgiven. Let me give you a helpful way to know what leads to that forgiveness that has been in use for over a century and a half.

You may know the name Walter Scott if you've studied up on the history of the Restoration Movement of which our church is a part. Scott was one of the four key early leaders in the Restoration Movement, along with Barton Stone, Thomas Campbell and Thomas' son, Alexander Campbell. Walter Scott was a successful evangelist and as such he developed a simple mnemonic illustration for the gospel plan of salvation that has been used in our movement ever since. Even now in fact, we teach it to our Pastors Class students every year.

As an evangelist, he would first come into a community and find a group of children. He would ask them to hold up a hand and then point to each finger and say the steps – "faith, repentance, baptism, remission of sins (forgiveness) and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit." It was what came to be known as the "Five Finger Exercise." Once the children had learned the mnemonic, he would ask them to tell their parents that he would be preaching that same gospel that evening and the crowds would come.

So, have faith, repent (or as we teach it in Pastors Class – turn around) from the things that take you away from God, be baptized, receive the forgiveness that is offered and the gift of the Holy Spirit that empowers you each and every day – faith, repentance, baptism, forgiveness, Holy Spirit.

We chose the scripture today out of Ephesians because Paul is as succinct as Paul can be. In the space of ten verses he outlines our predicament and the

solution to our predicament. He minces no words and spares no metaphor in presenting our situation before Christ arrived on the scene. "You were dead," he says, "through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived." That's pretty clear. "But God, who is rich in mercy out of the great love with which God loved us," (that was last week, right), "even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved."

Sin separates us from God and spiritually kills us but Christian identity means that we have been made alive in Christ. That's the promise of our text this morning. There's a story about a Catholic bishop who became annoyed by a particular woman in his diocese. She claimed to have daily personal conversations with Jesus. More and more enthusiasts came to her house. They sang hymns and offered prayers of hope and desperation. He wondered if this was about to get out of hand. What if local TV reporters came and asked difficult questions, and the Church ended up looking foolish?

The bishop decided it was time for a confrontation. He went to visit the woman. He suggested, gently but firmly, that she was probably self-deceived. The "voice of Jesus" was in all likelihood the soundtrack of her own mind. She listened politely, but didn't yield. Jesus was even, at that moment, speaking to her.

The bishop was prepared. "If Jesus is right here, right now, ask him to name the three sins that I confessed this morning when I went into the confessional. If 'Jesus' tells you those three precise sins, I might entertain the possibility you're really talking to him." The woman sat quietly for a long while. Then she turned to the bishop and smiled. She said, "I asked him. But Jesus said, '*I forgot.*'"² It's what God's forgiveness of our sin looks like. God forgives us and moves on and does not dwell on our past but dwells on our future.

Our forgiveness of others is in many ways more difficult for us because we live with decisions about forgiveness of others each and every day. Our forgiveness of others is a testimony to the fact that we have already been forgiven by God. Until we have experienced that forgiveness within us we do not have the power nor the desire to reach out and forgive others.

But when we speak of forgiving others, what really does that mean – what really are we doing? Let's start with what forgiveness of others is NOT. This matters because we use these reasons to justify not forgiving someone.

Forgiveness is NOT approving of what someone else did.

It does NOT mean pretending that evil never took place.
It does NOT mean making excuses for other people's bad behavior.
It does NOT mean justifying evil so that sin somehow becomes less sinful.
It does NOT mean overlooking abuse.
Forgiveness of others does NOT mean denying that others tried to hurt you repeatedly.
It does NOT mean refusing to press charges when a crime has been committed.
It does NOT mean forgetting the wrong that was done.
It does NOT mean pretending that you were never hurt.
It does NOT mean that you must restore the relationship to what it was before.³

That is what forgiveness of others is NOT. Let me tell you what I think forgiveness of others IS. Forgiveness is essentially a matter of the heart. This is a hugely important point because most of us think forgiveness is primarily about what we do or what we say. But it is quite possible to mouth kind words of forgiveness while harboring anger and bitterness within.

Forgiveness begins in the heart and eventually works its way outward. There is a profound sense in which all forgiveness, even forgiving someone who hurt you deeply, is between you and God. Other people may or may not understand it, or recognize it, or own up to their need to receive it. Forgiveness is about you and it does not matter whether it is received gracefully or at all.

Forgiveness in its essence is a decision made on the inside to refuse to live in the past. It's a conscious choice to release others from their sins against you so that YOU can be set free. It doesn't deny the pain or change the past, but it does break the cycle of bitterness that binds you to the wounds of yesterday. Forgiveness allows you to let go and move on. Forgiveness means no longer allowing a person or event to have power over you and control you.

Malcom Gladwell, a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, is known for a series of celebrated bestsellers including *The Tipping Point*, *Blink*, and *Outliers*. Gladwell has a knack for uncovering interesting stories in unexpected places, and demonstrating how things we expect to find often turn out to be surprisingly different.

He grew up a Mennonite – a small branch of Christianity known for its gentleness and pacifism. But Gladwell's faith evaporated when he moved to New York, a city not known for bolstering gentleness and pacifism. Then,

while doing research for a book, he visited the home of Cliff and Wilma Derksen, a Mennonite couple living in Winnipeg, Canada.

In 1984 their daughter Candace had been kidnapped by a sexual predator. The largest manhunt in the city's history followed. Police ultimately found the 13-year-old's frozen body in a shed. Her hands and feet had been bound. After the funeral, Cliff, the father of the girl, made a statement at a press conference. "We would like to know who the person or persons are so we could share, hopefully, a love that seems to be missing in these people's lives."

Wilma, the mother, added: "I can't say at this point I forgive this person." Everyone noticed that she had stressed the words "*at this point*." "We have all done something dreadful in our lives, or have felt the urge to." No one could imagine grieving parents saying such things.

Twenty-two years went by before Candace's murderer was brought to justice. The mother later wrote this: "Little did I know that the word forgiveness would haunt me for the next 30 years – prod me, guide me, heal me, label me, enlighten me, imprison me, free me, and in the end define me."

Gladwell, who was researching his book *David and Goliath*, wanted to know how this couple had been able to avoid falling into the abyss of rage and revenge. He writes: "Something happened to me when I sat in Wilma Derksen's garden. It is one thing to read in a history book about people empowered by their faith. But it is quite another to meet an otherwise very ordinary person, in the backyard of a very ordinary house, who has managed to do something utterly extraordinary. Their daughter was murdered. And the first thing the Derksens did was to stand up at a press conference and talk about the path to forgiveness."

He adds, "Maybe we have difficulty seeing the weapons of the spirit because we don't know where to look, or because we are distracted by the louder claims of material advantage. But I've seen them now, and I will never be the same." A horrific act of evil, calculated to bring little more than pain and sorrow into the world, instead accomplished something else. Redeemed by the courage of a hurting mom and dad trying to find their way forward, it brought Malcom Gladwell back to faith.⁴

This story powerfully illustrates that you can forgive even when other people make no confession. You can forgive without a restoration of the relationship. You can forgive when the other person has done nothing to earn forgiveness because forgiveness is like salvation—it is a gift that is

freely given, it cannot be earned. You can forgive and the other person may never even know about it. You can forgive without saying, "I forgive you" because forgiveness is not a matter of your vocal chords but is a matter of the heart.

Forgiveness is not easy. The cross testifies to the fact that it is the most difficult thing in all the world. But the power of the risen Christ in your life will help you to forgive others even as Christ has forgiven you. You may be holding on to a grudge against another person right now. That person's cruelty seems beyond forgiveness, but until there is forgiveness of them from your heart, it will be a burden to you. You will not know the freedom God wants you to have. God promises the power to forgive others. You do not have control over their response, but you do have control in your response to God.

Forgiveness – from God and your ability from that to forgive others – is a part of your Christian identity. It's who you are. My prayer is that you may be encouraged in this gift of forgiveness from God, and then take it and apply it to your life and leave with a different outlook on your life. Know that beyond all else you are LOVED by the one who is LOVE and that by accepting that love, you are FORGIVEN so that you may also FORGIVE OTHERS so that the hurt of others no longer controls you. It is your identity as Christian. Carry it with you. Show it to others so that they may see who you really are because of your relationship with Christ.

¹ Merriam Webster online dictionary at www.merriam-webster.com

² Story from daily email devotion on April 17, 2017 titled "Forgetting Sins" by Glenn McDonald, Director of Mission Integration at Ascension Ministry Service Center, Indianapolis, IN.

³ List of what forgiveness is not take from article titled, "Forgiveness: Healing the Hurt We Never Deserved." Found at www.keepbelieving.com, May 4, 2003

⁴ Story from daily email devotion on August 9, 2016 by Glenn McDonald, Director of Mission Integration at Ascension Ministry Service Center, Indianapolis, IN.