

To Heal the Sin Sick-Soul

John 7:53-8:11

August 30, 2009

(The Season after Pentecost)

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love ... He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high 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 he removes our transgressions from us.

The Lord is merciful and gracious ... Did you hear that? He does not deal with us according to our sins.

I hate to stir up bad memories, but do you remember the song about the Harper Valley PTA? Do you? If you don't you're lucky. *Wonderfully blessed*, is more like it, I think. Because *The Harper Valley PTA* was a "Country and Western" thing recorded by a woman whose name was Jeannie C. Riley. And it was a song about a woman a little like *her*, I think, who was the talk of the town and the topic of a good many rumors. She was what some people call "gossip fodder." With a lot of dirt to be dished out.

And the scoop on this woman was that she was like one of the Old Testament Women -- like Jezebel, maybe, or Madame Rahab of Jericho. That was the rumor. And it spread all over town. And she was shunned. A disgrace. A woman of ill repute!

And then one night at the local PTA meeting, she stood up and dished a little dirt out on them. Called their names, mind you, and pointed out some of their dirty little secrets...

It was quite a song, I think. They even turned this thing into a book or a screenplay -- a made-for-TV movie or something. And it even inspired a sermon, one Sunday. Harper Valley Sunday at the Florence Memorial United Methodist Church, located in beautiful downtown Dickson, West Virginia. Only that isn't what they called it. Youth Sunday is what they called it, I think.

The first sermon I ever preached was on a youth Sunday in that very church. I stood at the pulpit and held on for dear life in white-knuckled fear. And I preached for about six, maybe seven minutes tops (including the prayer at the end). Told them everything I had ever learned from the time I was a little boy in Sunday School. And as I say, it

was about six minutes long. And when it was over, one of the dear old saints of the church walked up to me and thanked me. She said she enjoyed it. Oh, and I'll never forget it. She asked me how old I was. And I was so nervous I couldn't tell her. I said, "I don't know." Really. But ... that's another story.

On this particular Youth Sunday (which happened to be when I was in seminary) one of the UMYFers decided that she wanted to preach the sermon. It was something she felt the Lord wanted her to do, she said. So, the youth planned the service for Sunday. They picked the hymns and put the order of worship together. And when Sunday morning came, they all did their part -- the Call to Worship, the Opening Prayer, the children's moments, and the Offering. And then it was time for the sermon. And this young girl ... (It was at Ann's home church, mind you. But it *wasn't* Ann. I *promise* it wasn't. *She* only preaches at home....) But this young girl stood there in the pulpit, took a deep breath, opened her mouth ... and out came the hot, burning, soul-searing flames of hellfire! On Youth Sunday! Hellfire and brimstone! From a fourteen year-old, blue-eyed blonde girl. With braces! And pigtails!

The topic was sin. Plain old, get-down-wallow-round-in-the-dirt, and shame on you sin! And mind you, she didn't just *talk* about sinners, **she pointed them out!** Called their names out tight there in the pulpit! "Mr. So-and-So," she said, "You're a sinner! God knows what you did last Saturday night. And he's going to get you! He's going to strike you down, Mister, right where you sit!" And she said, "As for you, old Mrs. Snooty-Pants, you're just a hypocrite! The way you carry on, all high and mighty ... it's a sin. And you should be ashamed! And old man Whosit, back there ... he might as well be the devil himself."

Oh, it was awful. It was hurtful and ugly. Though she did keep them awake! Nobody was nodding off in the pews *that* Sunday. There was weeping and gnashing of teeth! It was a terrible thing! And people were shocked! They were stunned and angry and hurt. Why would she do that? Why would she say such terrible things to them in church?

Those people weren't bad, you know. They were good, decent people. Kind, sweet, tenderhearted folk for the most part, I think. And goodness knows they weren't perfect. And they'd be the first to tell you they weren't. But good heavens! She made them sound like hardened

criminals. Thieves and murderers and *telemarketers*, even! As if they had slithered out from under a rock! Oh, it was awful! It's not the kind of thing you expect to hear at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning. At least not in God's house. You expect to hear about grace and forgiveness and God's mercy and love. **For God so loved the world that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might have life!** Isn't that *what you expect to hear from the church?* But there it was -- *the Harper Valley United Methodist Church.*

But Jesus said, "Judge not!" It's in the rules. Don't condemn other people. Don't put them down. Don't point out their faults! And for heaven's sake, don't beat them -- not even with words! But love one another ... isn't that what he said? **Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give ... and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.**

And yet ... it happened. It did. Right there in Florence Memorial United Methodist Church in Dickson, West Virginia. Population not very many ... not many at all. And on Youth Sunday, at that... People were hurt. They were confused. They couldn't understand how this fourteen year old girl could be so full of venom ... or whatever it was. So ... you know what they did? They loved her. They did. They prayed for that child. And they reached out to her there. And after all of the terrible things she had said, they forgave her.

Did you hear what James said at the end of his letter? He said, **My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.** ☒

Something like that happened once in Jerusalem, you know -- the Holy City. Only this time it was the church folk who pointed out the sins of a certain young woman. Good, decent, clean-living people did this says John. The best of the best. "She should be ashamed," they said. "she's a sinner if ever there was one. Rotten, low-down, despicable she is." And they had a point. I mean, *really*

they *did*. Because, after all, the law was on *their* side. Not the one on the law books, mind you. The one in God's book! The scriptures themselves said this woman was guilty. *This* woman was awful -- a terrible sinner to be shamed and shunned by good, decent church-going people like all of them. But you know the story ...

Jesus went up to the mountain to pray. And the next morning at dawn he went to the Temple gardens. And in no time at all, a crowd gathered round. And Jesus sat down to teach them about God. And all of a sudden, right out of the blue, some of the teachers there at the Temple brought some ... *woman* to Jesus. They found her, they said, with somebody's husband, some poor child's father! Caught her red-handed, no question about it. She was guilty. She'd broken the law, a commandment -- the *seventh* in fact. And when you break *that* commandment, you break someone's heart. You break someone's home and their family's trust (and your family's, too). Which is why the law was still there on the books -- in *the book*, that is.) So they brought her to Jesus the teacher, the wandering rabbi from Nazareth. "What should we do with this ... woman?" they said. The law says she should die!"

But they didn't care about the law. Not *really*, I mean. If they had they'd have brought the man, too. You know they saw him. They said it themselves. "We caught her in the act." And, mind you, one person can't break the seventh commandment. It always takes two. But where was he? They didn't bring *him*. They just brought her. And only because she was handy, I think. She was just being used to set a trap for the teacher -- for Jesus.

And it was a good one they thought. They had him cornered this time. No matter what he did he'd look bad *this* time. And they would look good. For if Jesus said, "Kill her," then all the common, hard-living, *everyday* people in the crowd wouldn't think so much of him. But if he said, "Let her go" -- they could say he was teaching people that the law didn't matter anymore. That it was okay to disobey God and break his commandments. Either way they had him. Either way he would look bad. And they would look good.

But Jesus ignored them. Didn't say *anything*. He just leaned over and wrote in the dirt with his finger. But they wouldn't give up. They kept coming at him with all of their questions. "What should we do, Jesus? What do you think? Should we stone her like it says in the law? Come

on, teacher, tell us! Should we execute this woman or not?

Jesus said, Go ahead. Do it ... And let the one among you who's never sinned throw the first stone.

And he stooped down again and wrote in the dirt. And, mind you, nobody knows what he wrote on the ground. And it doesn't *really* matter, does it? What mattered was what he wrote on their hearts. **Let the one without sin throw the first stone.** For when they heard him say that, they all went away -- from the oldest to the youngest. They all went away.

And so there she was -- this woman who'd broken the seventh commandment, and somebody's heart, and their home and maybe even her own. She stood there red-handed and guilty -- with Jesus the Teacher, the Son of God. Can you imagine? Peter stood there once, alone with the Lord, and you know what he said? "Go away, Lord. Please. For I am a sinner. I'm not good enough to stand in your shadow." *Peter* said that. *Peter the Rock!* And if he felt that way when the Lord looked at him, imagine how *she* felt (after what *she* had done).

But Jesus looked up and said, "Where are they? Isn't there anyone here to condemn you?" And the woman said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus looked at her and said, "I don't condemn you, either. Be on your way. And don't sin anymore."

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love ... He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high 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 he removes our transgressions from us.

It was as if God had forgotten what she had done. And that was something *she'd never forget* -- something, to her, that would be worth remembering for the rest of her life. Because something amazing and wonderful happened -- a sinner found out she was really a saint, not because she had earned it. And not because she deserved it. But because Somebody loved her. I mean *really* loved her. And knowing that and remembering *that* makes all the difference in the world. ✕

When I was in high school the youth from the Methodist church and the youth from the Baptist church decided to meet together. Every week. The youth decided to do this. On our own, mind you. Scared some of the older folks to death, nearly. Because the Methodists were afraid the Baptists would lure us over to *their* church. For good. And the Baptists were afraid that we'd shanghai their youth and make Methodists out of them. But ... it didn't happen. We just wanted to do things *together*, that's all.

And we did. We did. And the two pastors were thrilled. They thought it was great. And they'd come and join us sometimes. Even went on a few weekend retreats with us. And we got to know them and grew to love and respect them even more, I think. And *I* didn't really know that much about the Baptist preacher when all of this started. He was quiet and gentle and full of compassion -- one of the most Christ-like people I've ever known. Reverend Cox was his name. And he was close to retirement age (or just past it) I think. And when he spoke we all listened -- not because we were supposed to, but because his gentle wisdom spoke to our hearts.

And on one of those retreats, we were talking about that passage in the third chapter of Mark -- where Jesus talks about the one sin that can never be forgiven. The unforgivable sin. And we asked Reverend Cox what it was. And he got really quiet. And then he told us about something that happened when he was younger. He was pastor of a church in Fairfax, Virginia in those days, he said. And the church was in a slump -- a *spiritual slump*, he called it. Attendance was down. Way down, he said. And giving was off. And there just didn't seem to be any *life* in the church anymore. The faithful were still faithful, he said. But it was as if they were there, he said, because there wasn't anything *better* to do.

And he tried and tried to figure out how this had happened. And what was to blame. He read books and articles about *church burnout* and growth and decline. And he prayed. Every morning and every evening, he would kneel alone at the altar and pray that things would turn around. "But the more I prayed," he said, "the worse it became." And he said, "I thought it was me. It *had* to be me. I've offended people. I'm doing something wrong. Maybe I'm not trying hard enough," he thought. It just had to be something. So he tried harder and harder to turn things around and make the church thrive and grow.

He spent hours and hours each week working on sermons. And he went knocking on doors, inviting people there in the neighborhood to come to church. But people didn't want to be invited by preachers. *They're* paid to do that, they think. They want the church folk to invite them. They want the church, the people, to show them they care. Preachers are a dime a dozen, they know that. It's the church, the people, the fellowship they need.

He did all of that, he said. He tried and tried to be the best pastor he could be. But nothing happened. And at that point, he said, he began to question his call. Maybe God *hadn't* called him. Or maybe he had called him into the ministry, and now he was calling him out.

And he said, "I was just sitting there in the study one night, staring at the blank sheet of paper in the typewriter. And my heart felt so heavy. And my throat was sore from trying to choke back the tears. Because I was convinced that I committed the unforgivable sin. I didn't know how or when," he said. "But I just felt that I had let God down, that I had disappointed him so much that he didn't even want me around anymore."

You could've heard a *feather* drop when he said that. We just couldn't believe that someone like *him* -- someone so humble and good and so full of grace could even *think* such a thing. But he did. He thought he was so worthless, so sinful, he said, that God could never forgive him.

So he was sitting there staring at that blank sheet of paper, with all of that weighing so heavily on his heart. And there was a knock at the door.... It was one of his clergy friends. A Roman Catholic, he said. The priest of the Catholic church at the end of the block.

And the priest said, "I haven't seen you around lately, so I thought I'd just stop by and see how you're doing." And they talked a bit about nothing, really. And then all of a sudden the dam burst and Rev. Cox just poured his heart out to his friend. And he told him how things were there in the church, and how he had failed. And he said, "Father, I've let him down. I ... I haven't done what God called me to do here."

And the priest didn't say a word. And poor Reverend Cox said he just hung his head down and wept. And as he did, he heard what sounded like the rustling of paper. And he looked up and the priest was holding a little book in his

hands. And he had reached into his inside pocket and pulled out a little purple stole and placed it round his neck. (It's the color priests wear when they're in the confessional, hearing the people make their confessions.) And then, he said, the priest spoke in a voice that was firm and gentle: **The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love ... He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high 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 he removes our transgressions from us.**

“And he closed the book,” he said, “laid his hand on my head, and said, *My brother ... in the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.* And I stood and he put his arms around me and told me again that God loved me -- and he loved me so much that he would rather die than be without me.”

Reverend Cox looked at us that night and he said, “I still don't know what to say when people ask me about the unpardonable sin. All I know is that God loves us. Unconditionally, he said. And he takes our sins and our faults and our failures and remembers them no more.

Do you believe that?

Then let me say it to you again. **In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.**

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

Soli Deo gloria

Benen, OLSB



