

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent III, March 11, 2012, dedicated to Meredith Knueve for her excellence and compassion as a young attorney, to Abby, Brian and Tyler Scott as Tyler was born March 5th, and always to the glory of God!

Today, we come to our third prayer in the Great Prayers of the Bible. It a prayer offered by Moses in the book of Numbers. Like Abraham this past Sunday, Moses' prayer grows out of a deep and long relationship with God. Like Abraham, Moses offers a prayer of intercession and pleads with God to spare God's people.

Let us pray and enter into his prayer...

**“Moses: Forgive Them, Lord”
Numbers 14:13-23; John 2:13-22
Part IV of VIII in the sermon series,
“Great Prayers of the Bible”**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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We know him by one name. Moses. In the course of his 120 years, Moses served many diverse roles. He was liberator and lawgiver, guide and goad; castigator and collaborator; scapegoat and strategist; provoker and prosecutor, reconciler and revolutionary; referee and redeemer. Without a doubt, more than Jesus, Buddha or Mohamed, Moses was the single greatest leader of any religious community over a long and sustained period. Through his trust in God and relationship with God, Moses brought his people - two million strong in the end - liberation from slavery, laws and a land.

Through it all, Moses' received his nomination for best religious leader playing the role of “Moses in the Middle.”

At his birth, Moses is placed in basket in the Nile River - caught in the middle between Pharaoh's edict to destroy the Jewish newborn males and the midwives determination to save the babies by hiding them. Later, he is caught in the middle between a brutalizing Egyptian slave driver and a Hebrew slave - killing the Egyptian and fleeing to the middle of nowhere. In no man's land, he is caught between the cries of his people far away and caring for his new family and the sheep of the mountains in which he is hiding. When God appears in the middle of a burning bush, Moses is cast in the role of liberator - caught between Yahweh's power and Pharaoh's power.

Once his people are freed from slavery, Moses is in the middle of the desert for 40 years with two million people - an intercessor caught between God and God has chosen, but recalcitrant people. "Moses in the Middle" ultimately is caught in the middle between the desert and the Promised Land - dying on the banks of the Jordan River, but never crossing over to freedom.

We meet him today on one of toughest Middle Man assignments - interceding for God's people (Moses' people, too) who would rather worship a golden calf than the God who created and saved them. Moses has been to the mountaintop and received the Ten Commandments from God. As he descends from his mountaintop experience, he comes back to camp of "chosen Ones" worshipping a golden calf.

God - who has been in the Great Deliverer splits into a mood of great destruction. He is ready to wipe out the people completely. God is fed up with their idolatrous ways. They are worshiping a false God and YAHWEH is angry. Moses pleads to God for forgiveness of the people wrapped-up in their idolatrous worship. An argument ensues in the heart of prayer. Eventually, Moses successfully holds his middle ground and God promises to forgive the children of Israel. However, God's forgiveness is conditional. The generation that has committed the sins of idolatry will die in the desert. All but Caleb and Joshua will never see the Promised Land.

Conditional forgiveness. What does that mean? How can an unconditionally loving God forgive "with strings attached?" While we

struggle to understand God's actions, we certainly can relate to God. Can't we? We forgive conditionally all the time. We forgive on our terms.

From our youngest days, as we experience someone wronging us, we say, "I will forgive them, but I won't forget this" - the "I-will-be-your-worst-enemy Condition." OR "He was wrong in what he did. I will forgive him, but he will pay for this" - the Payback Condition. Mostly, our terms are unspoken - but they are judgmental and they certainly are conditional. I call this the Silent Grudge Condition.

However, we expect God to be unconditionally forgiving in all circumstances. Really? Consider this situation. The people have broken at least three of Ten Commandments - you shall have no other God, you shall not make for yourself an idol, and you shall not covet. I think we could also make the case that they wrongfully spoken God's name and broken the Sabbath day and defiled it. What is a God to do when God's followers have an unrepentant 50% record of following the laws given to them?

Essentially, the people of God are spinning out of control. They are sick and tired of being sick and tired; tired of wandering in the desert; eating manna from heaven and getting a little bit of water occasionally. They are moaning about going back to Egypt where the conditions were "better." They are lost in their misery and are looking for another way out.

To use the title of a recent television program - they are "Breaking Bad." You may be familiar with the show. Playing off the expression "bad breaks," Bryan Cranston (who formerly starred as the father on "Malcolm in the Middle") plays the role of Walter White, an underachieving chemistry genius turned high school chemistry teacher. He has a series of "bad breaks." However, the tipping point is when Walter is informed that he has Stage III cancer and has only a few months to live. In order to provide for his son with Cerebral Palsy, Walter chooses to use his expertise in chemistry to provide a legacy for his family... by producing the world's highest quality crystal meth.

He breaks bad!

He turns to a life of crime from a life of doing the right thing all the time. Now in its fourth season, this very dark comedy chronicles Walter's wild and downward spiral into the world of drugs and crime. Once on the path of breaking bad, there is seemingly no turning around. Once you have broken bad, keeping up appearances of goodness gets harder and harder.

Truly, Moses is the one person in the drama of the desert and God's impending wrath who loves the people unconditionally. He is the one who believes in them as Chosen ones. It is his belief that ultimately saves them. His bold prayer in Numbers stands in the breach between the breaking bad people of God and God. He becomes the "repairer of the breach" between God and God's people and between God and God's world (Brueggemann, Great Prayers, p. 21). Moses loves the people so much that he is willing to intervene on their behalf. He is willing to lay down his life for them. In the end, he too is denied entrance into the Promised Land - dying on the cliffs overlooking the land. He is buried in an undisclosed location. No one knows where. That was intentional, too.

When you pray, be like Moses. Be bold. Be purposeful. Be clear with God. Pray fervently for those who have "broken bad" in your life. Pray for those who others would seek to banish or destroy. Pray for those who everyone else has lost hope in. Pray for those who seem to be so lost in their lostness; so forsaken in their loneliness; so forgotten and un-forgiven in their daily lives that everyone else - justifiably so - has abandoned them and left them alone. Pray for those who do not have a prayer. Pray for those who have exasperated God. Stand in the middle and ask for forgiveness for those who no one else can or will name.

Pray for yourself as well - if indeed you do not fit the description above. Pray that God will help you forgive and forget. Pray that God will help you move past the hurts you are feeling - justified as they may be - and enter into the realm of love and grace in relation to those from whom you feel cut-off. Moreover, when you feel like you cannot do this.... Find a Moses for your life of prayer. Find someone who stand with you in the breach, stand with you in the brokenness and pain and pray on your behalf - with you.

Every single one of us needs an intercessor like Moses for those times and those circumstances when we have “broken bad” and do not know how to get back. It is never easy to return. With help from our prayer partners, we can make it home again. It may take awhile, but our God - who answered a bold prayer from a man in the Middle long ago - is waiting to welcome us.

I would like to believe God came to realize that even more was needed for human beings. We would need his son to see us through. He sent his son who loved us so much that he laid down his life for us. The seed of the savior was planted in this prayer from Numbers. God knew that people like us would need someone so full of love that he would help us from breaking bad - from turning away for God. Such love, such forgiveness, such hope grew out of a prayer of intercession on a desert mountain from the heart and the lips of Moses in the Middle. Amen.

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