

“Forgive and Raise Dry Bones”

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

Part VI of VIII in the Lenten sermon series, “Forgiveness”

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From the Pulpit

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Come with me to the state penitentiary at Marion, Ohio with a team of volunteers bringing the Good News to the inmates. We heard the story of a Latino inmate: He said: *Before I received faith I had one thing on my mind: revenge. I am in here because someone squealed about me, and I know who did it. I planned to get him as soon as I got out. That plotting occupied all my thoughts. But now I have Christ in my heart, am free of that. I have forgiven him; my mind is open; I am happier, and thinking positive thoughts about what I will do when I get out.*

There is another prison in Southwest Columbus called the Franklin Medical Center because the hospital for all the state prisons is there. While visiting there a scruffy, hungry-looking white inmate stood up and called out: *I am free. The public may think that I am locked up as a felon, behind bars as a thief, but I know that I am free!*

What’s behind what these men are saying? Are they merely hallucinating, projecting their wish list onto heaven, leaning on a crutch, or is there something to backup what they are saying?

They had heard what Jesus had said from the cross where he was being brutally executed: *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. Forgiveness!* Forgiveness is very important to those sentenced, because their sin is obvious – they have been convicted for breaking the law. But Jesus not only pronounced *forgiveness*, he also promised *new and restored life* for the forgiven.

Think of the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus was of a family living in Bethany on Mt. Olivet, within sight of Jerusalem. That family was precious to Jesus. He knew them, and had visited there. Lazarus died of a sickness. Jesus stood by his tomb and wept. *Jesus wept!* He was probably just weeping over the tragedies of human life – our struggles, our sicknesses, our deaths, our self-will when we do not reach out to him for the help he

could give us. But he brought Lazarus back to life, and he does the same for prisoners!

We read how Paul supports this by saying that it is the Spirit of God which in filling us brings us new life. Paul wrote: *If the Spirit of God, which raised Jesus from the dead, dwells in you, God ... will give life to your mortal bodies through the Spirit that dwells in you.* (Rom. 8:11)

Isn't it great that inmates can be forgiven by God? They need it. But what about us? How is this relevant to those of us who try not to break the law?

Don't we pray: *Forgive us our debts (as we forgive our debtors)?*

But how serious are we? Does this refer only to financial debts – or does it also include even trespasses or rudeness or selfishness?

The great German theologian Ernst Lohmeyer, who was executed by the Communists in East Germany, found, in studying the ancient Hebrew and Aramaic languages and the different words used for debts and trespasses, that what it is getting at is **absolutely everything**. *Everything* we have we have received from God. Absolutely everything! The air we breathe, the water we drink, our families, or communities, our culture – everything is from God. The Scriptures backs this up: Ps: 24: *The earth is the Lords, and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein.* Ps. 50: *“The world and all that is in it is mine”* says the Lord. Of course people have played their part too. As J. R. R Tolkien of *Lord of the Rings* fame said: *We are sub-creators with God, building great things by using the materials with which God has provided us.*

We are indebted to God for all of it – but often we don't get it. Rev. 3:17: *You say, 'I am rich, have prospered, and I need nothing.'* *You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked!* We don't get it until a crisis comes, and then sometimes we do cry out.

There is a recent very funny movie which I believe tells us a lot about the basic human condition. It is *A Man Called Otto*, starring Tom Hanks. It is the story of a mean, stubborn, ornery old man who has just retired. He has

retired, and lost all of his work friends. His wife has died, he has no children, and there is nothing left for him to live for. He decides to take his own life – and that is when the movie gets rally hilarious – he just can't figure out how to do it successfully.

But what I am getting at is the back story of Otto's life. Both his parents died at an early age. He had a medical issue so he could not go into the military with his friends. He had good mechanical skills, so he could always find a job, but without social skills, he was always lonely. Then he met just the right woman, and she brought warmth, color in to his life and negotiated with the world for him. Then, after he had lost all of this, he was thrown back onto the basics of human reality.

When Otto was lonely and depressed, he saw that the basic human condition can be is scary. There is a side to each of us which is simply that tiny baby coming out of the womb and crying out, *Mommy! Daddy! Where are you? Who is going to take care of me?*

You students will remember when we were wrestling with the *existential* questions – what would life be like if there were no God? Kierkegaard, Sartre, Camus asked: *Without God, aren't we all alone? There are no helps; we must just invent our own lives and values.* And Nietzsche had said: *Without God, there is no right or wrong, no good or bad, and we must just throw out all of what we think about morality!* Didn't he call it the *devaluation of value*? If you want to be a dictator, that's O.K.!

But God is not dead! God is real! Christ really did live and die for us! Christ and the Holy Spirit really can bring us forgiveness and give us new life, even when we don't appreciate what we have been given!

Think of the story of the Valley of Dry Bones. Israel had been conquered by Babylonia, and had lost everything. Their Temple, the center of their civilization in Jerusalem, destroyed. Their precious law, the Torah, which enabled them to live by law and order, could not be followed in Babylonia. Their centuries-old dynasty of King David – gone. Their precious promised

land – occupied by a foreign power. Ancient Israel had become like a valley of dry bones. And their prophets, like Jeremiah, said that it was their own fault. They had not appreciated what God had given them but instead had been selfish, greedy, oppressed their poor, didn't pay wages, and generally behaved like bad neighbors.

But Ezekiel, the prophet who was living there in Babylonia with them, had this vision from God that those dry bones would come back to life. They would be put back into living bodies, and the Lord God would breathe life into them once again, just as God had breathed life into Adam and Eve at the beginning. There was hope after all!

And our American slaves, themselves dry, dead bones, read this story and sang about it: *Dem bones, dem bones, dem a-dry bones. The head bone connected to the neck bone. Now hear the word of the Lord!*

OK then, we have been forgiven by Christ and we have received new life in his spirit. What then? As John the Baptist said: *Bear fruits that befit repentance!* Act like forgiven people! Pastor Norman Brown used to tell the inmates: If you have revived Christ and his forgiveness, then you must turn around. It is like you are dribbling a basketball down the court toward one basket. You must turn around the dribble towards the other basket. You must turn around, and go in a new direction! No more selfishness! No more meanness!

I am giving illustrations this morning from prison life. Yes, God is doing his part in restoring the lives of individual prisoners. We are in a time of national crisis over violence, and there are other ways to combat violence than putting people behind bars.

Providing *hope for the poor* is one. *Abolishing poverty* is another. Another is *providing people with affordable housing*. In Columbus, 54,000 residents are paying more than half their paychecks for housing, if they can even find it. What can be done? Let me give you an example. When we lived in NJ we were adjacent to the town of Mt. Laurel, which had formerly simply been farmland. When it was developed, people insisted that for every

development, 15 or 20% of the units would be set at affordable rates. That was called the *Mt. Laurel Decision, and it became state law*. I am happy to say that we were a part of the struggle to keep that afloat when we lived in NJ and I was on the county homeless committee. Some said, *but they will destroy our property values! This will destroy our schools!* But did it? If so, why does NJ still rank #1 in education in the nation, while Ohio is #31. And while Ohio ranks #3 in homicide rate in the nation, third worst, NJ ranks #38!

But getting the law passed was only the beginning. Every year the construction and real estate lobbyists would fight hard to get exceptions to the law or to get the law changed, so it took constant steady efforts to keep this good law working.

But God brings new life to dry bones. There is a lot to do, but each of us can do something. Everywhere we need to sit down with others trying to be good neighbors and just think through how we can make a difference.

Let me close with the story of an inmate named Ramon at Franklin Medical who lived out a changed life. Ramon was raised in a Black family living in a white neighborhood. He was doing well when he graduated from high school. But then he got into trouble and was locked up. He was so embittered by the experience that in his words: *I wanted to do something really bad, just to throw it back in their faces*. He did, and got a long sentence. He was a big, strong guy and, bitter in prison, was in constant fights and miserably unhappy. Then – and I thank God that I was with him at the time – he received Jesus as his Savior, and he did turn around. He would walk away from fights, and he would help new arrivals. But then he started working as a volunteer at the hospital. He was working in the ward for the lifers – the old guys who would die in prison, no visitors. They were at the end of their lives and in very poor health. He found that the other prisoner-volunteers were mistreating them and even stealing from them. And, even the paid staff were not changing them on time, and treating them poorly. He announced: *Not on my watch!* He insisted that the inmates do their jobs, and he pushed the paid professional staff to fulfil their responsibilities. The care given at the lifers'

ward improved. The warden said to him later: *Thanks for your doing that. It had needed to be done and we just were not able to do it. You pushed us in exactly the right direction.*

Ramon is out now, living in the Canton, Ohio area and doing very well.

God forgives, and it makes a difference.

Amen.

Rev. Larry Miller retired from the First Presbyterian Church of Mt. Holly, New Jersey as Minister of Administration.

