

Psalm 32:1-11

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.² Happy³ are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.³ While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.*⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the guilt of my sin.*⁶ Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.⁷ You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.*⁸ I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.⁹ Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you.¹⁰ Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.¹¹ Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart. (NRSV)

*After verses 4, 5, and 7, "Selah", an untranslatable Hebrew word, occurs in this and other psalms. Its meaning remains unclear, although it may have been a musical term.

"Lent" is a time of preparation for Easter, but it has a rather dreary reputation. There are no "Happy Fasting and Repentance" cards at Hallmark. This writer, however, seems to have a different view. His first word is "*happy*".

Not many psalms tell as personal a story as Psalm 32, though on Ash Wednesday, we considered another one, Psalm 51, that's pretty personal, and pretty somber. David, the writer, had been publicly exposed as guilty of adultery and murder, and he was devastated. You almost felt sorry for the guy. But here, David writes again about his failings—and this time, he's actually *hopeful*. So how can he mention "*sin*" and "*happy*" in the same sentence?

It took him a while to get there. He tried other strategies. For example, he tried denial: "*I kept silent.*" We can relate. We may ignore something because we think "it's for the best". But denial, David says, takes so much energy—he felt "*dried up as in the heat of summer.*" "*The heat of summer*" is a pretty distant memory this winter—let's think of it this way: ignoring the truth is a kind of spiritual frostbite; we're numb, frozen in place.

Further: God never cooperates with a cover-up. "*Your hand was heavy upon me...*" In Psalm 51, he said, "*You desire truth...*" God only deals with truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The lesson: let's just deal with it, whatever "it" is.

But back to my question: How can David use "*happy*" in a conversation about sin? There is such a confident tone in Psalm 32. He acknowledges his shortcomings ("*...you forgave*"), and there is no more talk of sin. He moves on, confident in God's forgiveness, and even advocates "*shouting for joy*".

That sounds simplistic. But forgiveness is at the core of who God is. This morning, we encounter two interesting words: “Selah”—a word whose meaning is lost in history—and another word. It’s found in this text and throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, and is one of the most important words in the Bible. It’s right up there with love, grace, or faith. It’s *Hesed*. In English, it’s usually translated “*steadfast love*.”

I’m not saying it’s easy, no problem, a slam dunk. What is at the core of God’s character is not at the core of who we are.

I was thinking back to when I was about eight, when I was innocent, sweet, charming...and rotten to the core. I suspect you too remember times when your sibling takes your favorite toy. You do the natural thing: you file a grievance with the nearest parent, who thinks: I’ll bring these two parties together for an exercise in problem-solving! Mom or Dad says to the thief: “Give it back, and say you’re sorry.” The offender, with really no alternatives, mumbles something that vaguely sounds like an apology. Then, your parent tells you: “Now tell them it’s OK.” You do, but neither you nor your sibling believe it. But your parent walks away, hoping that the crisis is over. But that’s not forgiveness. That’s a standoff.

It’s hard to forgive. Forgiveness is one of the most powerful things we will ever experience. But in real life, it is also one of the most challenging. There are places where forgiveness is considered either impossible or unthinkable. Is forgiveness being practiced today in Syria, on the Korean Peninsula...or in our nation, where we incarcerate people who break the law at rates unheard of among developed nations? Where we’re encouraged to arm ourselves and be prepared to shoot them if they invade our space? Forgiveness, we’re often taught, is absurd, illogical, a sign of weakness—it may even be dangerous.

What makes it so hard is that *forgiveness absorbs pain*. Forgiveness says: I have been hurt—but the hurt stops here. Think: the cross, where in the face of what is arguably history’s most outrageous and inexcusable crime, Jesus said “Father, forgive them.”

So what do we do? Forgiveness may take time; we may need help. But most of all: we need to live as forgiven people, and many of us do not.

It’s hard to give something that we haven’t received. We, having been taught that we must earn our way back, often withhold it from ourselves. We instinctively doubt that God really means it, and we deny God the opportunity to wrap us in the warmth of steadfast love. But know this: It is not God who withholds forgiveness from us. “Steadfast” means *steadfast*: unwavering, undeterred, settled, a furiously tenacious, forgiving love that even our most outrageous failings cannot change, and the God who in Jesus forgave His executioners will not fail to welcome every prodigal child, even you and me, with open arms, no questions asked. What part of “steadfast love” don’t we understand?

After the nightmare of apartheid in South Africa; Nelson Mandela and FW de

Klerk, one time bitter opponents in a divided land, found a way to work together to heal their country. They helped establish the Truth & Reconciliation Commission, which provided a way to tell the painful stories of oppressor and oppressed, and despite the loss of several generations to prejudice and hatred, they found a way to say: The pain is real, and the scars run deep, but the pain stops here.

Forgiveness is the way of God in the world, who meets us every day with “*steadfast love*”. God simply forgives. We are forgiven. We start anew. And we can participate in the healing of the world, by practicing “*Hesed*,” steadfast love, declaring that in our dealings with our loved ones, our neighbors, and our enemies, the pain stops here. Forgiveness is the “amazing” in Amazing Grace.

God: we are good at seeing our need for forgiveness. Help us to be better at trusting that when you offer to cover us with grace, you really mean it. May we dare to believe that you are the God of *hesed*, and that your grace wins. May we rest in that; no: may we grab onto it, and let your steadfast love—not our self doubt—be evident to all.