

“It’s her fault. She started it.” Six magic words that can elicit one of five responses from a parent or caregiver: an eye roll; a big sigh; a rubbing of the temple; a hand on the back of the hip, or all four. Of the five, I am not sure which one my parents chose that Saturday evening 30 years ago when I stormed out of my sister’s bedroom and defiantly slammed the door shut as her hand rested in between the door and the door frame. I can’t remember what had upset me so much, but as my parents’ tended to my sister’s very swollen pinkie finger and wiped her tears, I set about explaining that if she had not done something to provoke me in the first place, none of this would have happened. Who knows if my “she started it” excuse worked or not, but even if it didn’t, that certainly didn’t stop me from saying it for years to come.

Can any of us honestly say that we’ve ever stopped saying that phrase or some form of it? As adults, rarely do we say it with same whiny, nasally, and desperate voice of childhood. But when things fall apart at the office, or a miscommunication between parents leaves the kids waiting far too long to be picked up after sports practice, or lifelong friends and partners no longer have much to say to one another, it’s so easy to point fingers or make an excuse. When the Great Recession barreled into our lives ten years ago, we blamed our politicians. Today, with all of the hate mongering defining us, it’s so clear who’s at fault: “them over there”—whoever “them” is and wherever “there” is. Rarely do we consider that we breed our own prejudices and stereotypes. If I seem to harsh, I guess it’s because we can’t be expected to be responsible for everything *all* the time. Just consider how many times you have apologized to someone by saying, “I’m sorry I hurt you...*but*, I was having a bad day” [or] “I didn’t mean to say it that way; you’re too sensitive” I know I have, this week even. Even as I try to catch myself doing it, it’s hard not to soften the blow of my complicity. To have no excuse and only be left to say “I was wrong” reminds us of the depth of our power and ability to do harm—unconscious or not.

Although we may no longer worry about “getting in trouble” as we once did as children, our hesitancy to face ourselves and our contribution to the tension in our relationships or our complicity in injustice and evil suggests that there are still parts of ourselves living in fear—whatever that fear may be. Fear of not being not good enough or capable enough; fear of not being skillful or qualified enough. And if not fear, then perhaps it’s doubt with which we wrestle—doubt about being useful or relevant, nice or holy enough.

If we were to pause after each line of the confession today to dwell on things we have done and left undone the laundry list might very well send us packing, afraid to kneel or stand at this altar or look someone in the eye. Certainly, it wouldn't be good for our ego or sense of self.

But what if we knew—*really knew* in our gut—that we could list everything we have ever done and God would still come running out to crown us with love and compassion as the Psalmist sang?

Maybe then the default wouldn't be to add a condition to our apologies or make excuses for ourselves.

What if we didn't have to doctor up what we have failed to do or what we keep doing without any kind of desperate justification?

Perhaps, I believe, our limitations would not be things we strive to conquer a la our own personal version of the Amazing Race. Instead, they'd be places through which we can reach out to God and to others and find peace in interdependence, not self-sufficiency.

And, what if your only option was to face yourself and face God without pretense or reservation so that God could wipe the dirt off of your face, clean the slate, and declare you worthy and still very much in the game like everyone else? *Instead of feeble attempts at trying to even the score or pay back God, we might instead find ourselves inhabiting the freedom of no longer trying to be sure that others get their just desserts, too.*

Above all, what if the crown of “not enough” were traded in for the crown of love and faithfulness, as the Psalmist sang? *Perhaps the mercy we receive but don't deserve would overflow into mercy with others, because we can't begin to forgive others—truly forgive—(and let go of any desire for retribution, blaming, or shaming) until we embrace what God pours out endlessly upon ourselves.*

We can't begin to hear Jesus' words in the Gospel lesson this morning until we first claim the words of the Psalm. Otherwise the parable's ending that “God will do the same to you if you don't forgive” will sound like a threat of divine retribution when in reality Jesus' one-two parable punch are his way of “playing out that ‘eye for an eye’ mindset to its logical extreme. It's like God is saying, ‘You want to play the tit-for-tat game? OK, fine, we'll play that game. But in that game, you always lose. You end up being tortured for life if you really want to hold everyone completely accountable for all their sins. And that's exactly why I sent my Son to bring the message of grace to you: because you can never win if it's all about meticulously keeping track of who owes you what. Because the bottom line is, you owe me everything.’¹ And yet—I forgive you for everything, not because you are blameless or sinless, but because by virtue of being made in my image and being

¹ Tracy J. Wells Miller, part of an online discussion on Matthew 18:21-35, September 15, 2017.

forever united with me through Jesus' victory over the very things that once could have driven a wedge between us, you are forgiven and made worthy.

Friends, I know it's hard, I do; but, that is the foundation for which we strive to make the same journey with others. This week, what would it look for you to be caught up in the the rapture of God's love and the possibility of being free from the games, the excuses, and the fears?

Twelve years ago, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, CNN did a story about several New Orleans' residents left homeless by the storm's wake. They had traveled from shelter to shelter looking for a place to rest when a reporter found them walking along the interstate. The reporter talked to one young woman who said that her father lived hundreds of miles away in the Midwest, but they had a falling out years ago, and she had run South instead. "She asked if she could use the reporter's cell phone to get in touch with someone to them know she and friends were okay. The reporter obliged and the woman called her father back in the Midwest. They had not spoken in some time, bridges having been burned and all. But he answered the phone. 'Daddy, I'm OK,' she said. Then she burst out into tears, 'I don't know how we're going to get out of here! I'm so scared!' They exchanged just a few words before she hung up the phone. The reporter asked, 'what did he say?'

'He said he's coming down right away to pick us up.'"²

And so it is with God—
refusing to keep score
even when we do,
and
Giving you a crown of glory and love
in exchange for a crown of thorns—
and setting you free.

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² As recounted by Wallace W. Bubar, "Pastoral Perspective (Psalm 103)" *Feasting on the Word*, v. 12 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 58, 60.