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The Apostle's Creed: The Forgiveness of Sins
Luke 7:36-47

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table.

37 And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment.

38 She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.

39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner."

40 Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak."

41 "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.

42 When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?"

43 Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly."

44 Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.

45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet.

46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.

47 Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."

48 Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

49 But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

50 And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Last week we studied ‘the holy catholic church and the communion of saints’.
This week we move on to the next phrase in the Apostle’s Creed:
I believe in...the forgiveness of sins.

There are ***two sides*** to the issue of forgiveness—
God’s forgiveness of us, and our forgiveness of one another.
The Creed doesn’t specify just one side,
so it implies both types of forgiveness.

But why do we need forgiveness?
We all know we do, but we don’t often talk about why.
We don’t talk much about ***sin***.
Yet we read about it throughout scripture from the very first story,
and Jesus taught about it often in his ministry.

The most common Greek word for sin in the Bible is ***hamartia***—
which means ‘*to miss the mark*’.

I like that—because we ALL miss the mark, on a daily basis, right?

We all suffer from this ‘miss the mark’ illness.

And forgiveness is the ***spiritual cure for this spiritual illness***.

Hamilton, Adam. Creed. Abingdon: Nashville, 2016, pg. 130.

We are all sinners, that’s why forgiveness and grace are so important!
We like to think that ***THOSE people*** are the real sinners,
the big time criminals, the terrorists,
the people whose pictures are paraded across our news.

But the truth is, we are all sinners, ***each one of us in here***,
and we are all in need of the very same grace.

It does ***no good to point fingers*** –

because the rest of our fingers are all pointing back at ourselves.

Alexandr Solzhenitsyn said it so well:

*If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and
it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them.*

But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.

Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), part 1, 168,
quoted by Adam Hamilton in Creed, pg. 133.

Good and Evil cuts through ***every human heart***. We ***all*** struggle with sin.

In the fourth century a church father named **Ponticus** described what he thought were the **seven cardinal sins**—

today we might know them as the seven deadly sins.

Hamilton, Adam. *Creed*. Abingdon: Nashville, 2016, pg. 131.

Lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, anger, envy and pride.

Many theologians would say that the last one is the root of all others—***pride***.

If you think about it, that makes sense.

When life is all about us, everything can easily go south.

When God is not our focus, sin is inevitable.

Pride is the exact opposite of our Savior Jesus,

who was the ultimate example of humility.

Paul so gracefully describes Jesus in Philippians 2, when he says:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.

4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,

7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

The first part of forgiveness is God's forgiveness of us.

God forgiving us can be very personal, right?

We don't go around talking about how we've screwed up, and how much we need God's grace, do we?

But maybe we should.

Isn't that where the power of a 12 step program comes from?

From that ability to admit that we are powerless over our addiction?

The ***ability to say I messed up and I need help.***

When was the last time you said to God, I messed up, and I need help?

You know, that's exactly the reason we have a ***unison prayer of confession***, followed by a moment of silent confession in worship each Sunday.

We acknowledge in our tradition the power of confessing our sins, of admitting that we've messed up and we need God's help.

We use prayers that try to get at the heart of our common failures as **individuals**, and our communal sins as the **people** of God.

Both sins must be confessed.

The silent confession is to be more specific with God about our failures.

What used to be confessed to a priest,

is in the Reformed tradition, **confessed directly to God**.

A **Presbyterian** worship service,

in fact, many reformed worship services,

are not complete without this time of confession,

and it's near the **beginning** of the service—for a reason.

We need to know **who we really are**

before we can truly understand and gratefully receive

the grace of God through the Word and Sacraments.

The Bible is very clear about **who needs forgiveness**.

The answer is everyone---each and every human being.

Romans 3:23 says *that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*.

Sin exists from the very beginning in the Garden of Eden.

Because we were given free will,

we had the option to sin, to turn away from God, to do wrong.

And that's exactly what we did.

Now, some people **believe this—to the extreme**.

They hold onto their own sins so tightly

that they are burdened with **guilt and shame**,

sometimes over something that occurred years ago!

I've listened to many people confess something from years ago,

and they are still holding onto shame and guilt!

Some guilt is good and moves us to repent and reconcile.

It can move us forward.

But **too much guilt is a burden** we weren't meant to carry.

Jesus wants us to experience grace and forgiveness!

It's his mission!

In *Matthew 1:21* Joseph was told to call the baby Jesus,

because he will save his people from their sins.

When Jesus shared his **Last Supper** with his disciples,

taking the cup, he poured the wine saying, *this cup is the new covenant, sealed in my blood, and shed for the forgiveness of sins.* (Matt 26:26-28).

As he hung on the **cross**, he offered forgiveness to a thief beside him, and he called out *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing* (Luke 23:34).

Jesus ALWAYS offered forgiveness to sinners.

When we hold onto our guilt and shame,
we are denying the very gift of Christ on the cross!

Sometimes this happens because we have a ***broken image of God***,
an idea of God as an angry, vindictive judge.

Our images of God are often shaped by our parents or other people...
but the real God is the one found in the person of Jesus Christ.

And Jesus ALWAYS offered forgiveness.

Jesus doesn't intend for us to hang onto guilt and shame,
he came that we might be freed from that burden, from those chains.

One of the very best movies about this came out in 1986—

it's called ***The Mission***, and it's one of my favorite films.

The story is about a slave trader who kills his brother,
and for his atonement, he joins some catholic priests as they go to start a
mission among the native peoples—
people he once forced into slavery.

The tribe is located up steep falls,
and as he is climbing and following another priest up the mountain,
he is also carrying a ***big net*** filled with different metallic objects, tools, pans,
all kinds of heavy objects, strapped to his back.

This too, is part of what he believes is necessary payment for his sins.

One of the most moving parts of the movie is when the priest in front of him
turns around to the slave trader, played by Robert De Niro,
and ***cuts the pack off of his back***.

The two then watch it plummet into the waterfall.

It is an incredible moment of grace and forgiveness.

Jesus doesn't want us to hold onto guilt and shame.

He died on the cross that we might experience forgiveness and grace!

We need only say we're sorry to God, then we are forgiven.

We *don't have to carry heavy burdens* throughout our lives!

While some hang onto guilt, *others fail to see their own sins*.
I'd say this is an even more common problem.
Many can more readily identify with Simon the Pharisee,
Instead of the woman who anointed Jesus.

We come to worship with what we *consider to be 'small sins'*
that we have committed throughout the week.
Some of them we have even *justified* as necessary,
Or maybe a lesser of two evils.

We all know what sins I'm talking about.

Maybe we've lied to a family member or friend,
we've succumbed to temptations, unethical decisions, or addictions.
We've failed to reach out to someone in need, or been stingy with our money,
or put our own interests before everyone else,
sometimes disguising this as just taking care of business.

We have committed sins of *commission* (things we've done)
and *omission* (things we failed to do), all throughout the week.

And we come here to *worship to receive God's grace—*
but *how can we receive it,*
how can we experience the gratitude for it,
if we don't know how much we need it?

Remember Jesus' parable at the dinner table?

When they could not pay, the creditor canceled the debts for both of them.

Now which of them will love him more?"

*43 Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt."
And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly."*

Our love for God depends on our understanding of God's grace in our lives.

Like the sinful woman, we can truly express our love for God
after we fully comprehend
the extravagance of God's grace and love for us!

Her extravagant gift of costly ointment

was in direct response to the *extravagant gift of forgiveness* from Jesus!

It's like the *cross*.

It takes on *new meaning* when we understand why we need it, you know?

When was the last time you were able to *honestly assess* your own failures and sins?

Not giving into shame,

or ignoring the reality of our sins?

That's an important step to receiving God's grace!

The second part of forgiveness is *our forgiveness of others*.

Matthew 6:14-15 is the most blunt statement by Jesus on this topic.

While Jesus is teaching them the Lord's Prayer he says:

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

13 *And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.*

Then Jesus says this: 14 *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you;*

15 *but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

Wow.

Those are some *hard words* from our Savior, aren't they?

But we are reminded of them every single Sunday,

as we too pray the *Lord's prayer*:

forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

That second phrase is so important...as we forgive our debtors.

So the question is,

are we forgiving those who have sinned against us?

It's sure not easy, is it?

There's an incredible movie about *forgiveness and grace* out in theaters right now, and I highly recommend it.

It's a new favorite of mine.

It's called ***The Shack***, based on the bestselling book by Wm. Paul Young.

Ed and I just saw it a few weeks ago.

The story is about a man named **Mack** whose youngest daughter **Missy** is brutally murdered in an Oregon shack, and he receives a letter from God, asking him to come to that Shack four years later. He arrives to find the **Trinity**, three people-- Papa, Jesus and Sarayu—who represent the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It's an amazing story about Mack's understanding of God, and the power of forgiveness.

By the time **Mack returns he is a new man**, completely transformed and freed from the feelings that held him hostage: *hatred, revenge and retaliation*.

You'll have to see the movie to see how he is transformed. It's amazing.

This movie has a lot to teach about the **power of forgiving** those who hurt us. And you will definitely need some Kleenex!

When have you been so hurt ***you thought you could not forgive?***

Sometimes this happens because we confuse forgiveness with ***forgetting***.

Forgiveness does not mean we have to forget.

Now sometimes we should forget—if we kept a score card of every little hurt we'd be broken under the weight of that...

But when we have been severely hurt, it's unreasonable to forget.

That's not what God requires.

Forgiveness also does not mean

That we remove the consequences of someone's actions.

People who commit a crime ***have consequences*** for those actions.

Forgiveness doesn't take that away.

Forgiveness also does not mean we must have a ***relationship*** with the person who hurt us.

We need ***boundaries*** with some people who are hurtful or cruel.

We don't need to necessarily have a friendship with someone who has hurt us.

Reconciliation is wonderful when it happens, but it is not always possible.

So what is forgiveness?

Forgiveness really means ***letting go of the chains around*** our hearts, when we nurse grudges and hold onto hatred and revenge.

Forgiveness is ultimately about **freedom**.

In fact, the word for forgiveness in the New Testament, **aphiemi**, means '**to release**'.

Isn't that great?

Forgiveness is about **letting go**—

kind of like letting a burden be cut off our back,
or allowing our heart to have grace for those who have hurt us,
and our loved ones.

Most of us know the **healing power of forgiveness**.

Surely you've heard the old adage that

*holding a grudge is like **drinking poison** and hoping the other person gets sick!*

What about get '**bitter or get better**'.

I think we can agree that getting better is the best way to live, right?

The two sides of forgiveness are totally connected.

Experiencing the grace of God in our own lives,
enables us to **share** that grace with those who hurt us.

The **grace** we receive is the grace we give.

The **love** we experience is the love we share.

Just like the woman who anointed the feet of Jesus.

So when we say ***I believe..in the forgiveness of sins***,

We are saying that we accept God's forgiveness of our sins,

AND we forgive those who sin against us.

That's the ***Good News of the Gospel*** today:

We believe in the forgiveness of sins—

of God's forgiveness of everything we've done and left undone---

And our forgiveness of our debtors.

And every time we say the Apostle's Creed may we ***give thanks***

for the grace of God, which has the power to change our lives!

Amen.