

Christ Community Covenant Church

God has spoken: Forgiveness – ‘Draw near to the throne of Grace with confidence’; Hebrews 4:14-16

Pastor Dave Scherrer - October 13, 2013

One of the core problems of life is our sinfulness and how do we deal with the guilt and the shame that inevitably comes in life. The reality is we all mess up – we all sin – and thus everyone in this room to some degree or another stands in need of forgiveness. How do we get it?

Before Simon Wiesenthal became the world’s foremost Nazi hunter he wrote a little book that focuses on the issue of forgiveness called *The Sunflower*. He tells a haunting story, a true event that occurred during his imprisonment in a concentration camp. Wiesenthal was yanked out of a work detail and taken up a back stairway to a darkened hospital room. A nurse led him into the room, and then left him alone with a figure wrapped in white lying on a bed. The figure was a German soldier, badly wounded and dying. He was swathed in yellow-stained bandages. Gauze covered his entire face with openings cut out for mouth, nose and ears.

In a weakened trembling voice the German – Karl - made a kind of sacramental confession to Wiesenthal. He recounted his early days in the Hitler Youth Movement, told of his action along the Russian front and the increasingly harsh measure his SS unit had taken against the Jewish populace.

And then he told of a terrible atrocity, when all the Jews in one town were herded into a wooden frame building that was then set on fire. Burning bodies fell from the second floor and the SS soldiers – he among them shot them as they fell. He started to tell of one child in particular a young boy with black hair and dark eyes but his voice gave way.

Several times Wiesenthal tried to leave the room but each time the ghost-like figure would reach out with a cold bloodless hand and beg him to stay. Finally after two hours the soldier explained why Wiesenthal had been summoned.

“I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace.” And then he begged for forgiveness for all his crimes. Simon Wiesenthal stood in silence for some time staring at the man’s bandaged face. At last he made up his mind and left the room, without saying a word. He left the soldier in torment; unforgiven.

Over the years I have thought a lot about that story. Did he do the right thing? Can someone else render someone forgiven? Wiesenthal sent the story to 32 of the best and brightest to ask them their thoughts and their responses make up the rest of the book. But the book for me raises an even deeper question than can we forgive another – it begs the question *‘How do any of us find any forgiveness?’*

How do any of us find any forgiveness?

All of us have our own brokenness to deal with. There are those things we feel guilty about, or ashamed of, or wish we could do over. There are times when we’ve lied, or cheated, or stolen, or been unfaithful, or immoral or unloving, or selfish. We hide things because we are ashamed and fear that we may not be forgiven and the weight of that is overwhelming. We all have people we have hurt, greedy acts we have committed, words we said that never should have been uttered. All of us know deep in our hearts our own blackness and brokenness. We know better than anybody else – because we know our own hearts – just how broken we are. We all, in a sense, sit here desperate for forgiveness. Where do we find it?

Last week the Frenchman Blaise Pascal reminded us that in our lives we have a vacuum - a God sized hole – a hole that only a relationship with Him can fill. We try to fill it with all kinds of

substitutes but they fall short; only God can fill this infinite need for forgiveness, love and purpose. I suggested that it is filled by entering God's rest.

This *rest* is a relationship with God where we experience the fullness of his blessings, the satisfaction of being able to boldly go to God without shame or fear. This is salvation and every other good blessing of God comes from this relationship. It saturates us in the abundant life - it is God's best.

We enter this rest through *faith* not by works and the evidence of our faith is *obedience* in *surrendering to Christ*. However, the great obstacle to entering this rest is our sin - which is exposed by the word of God.

Hebrews 4:12-13

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

God's all-knowing eye exposes our sin and our brokenness will be laid bare – God sees us for what we are. That should cause for us a bit of desperation. Frankly, I don't know of a single person I have ever met who does not live under the weight of this burden. The great obstacle to entering this rest is this burden of sin.

The great obstacle to entering this rest is our sin

It is as though there were a huge obstacle between us and the moment we start trying to remove it and push it away it simply continues to grow. It seems that merely by being aware of it makes the obstacle even more unmovable.

Key Question: How do we remove the obstacle and find forgiveness?

Answer: Through our High Priest Jesus

Hebrews 4:14-5:10

¹⁴ Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

⁵ For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. ³ Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people. ⁴ And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

⁵ So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him,

“You are my Son,
today I have begotten you”;
⁶ as he says also in another place,
“You are a priest forever,
after the order of Melchizedek.”

⁷ In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. ⁸ Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. ⁹ And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, ¹⁰ being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

In order to understand what the Jewish Christians reading this little sermon understood we have to know a little more about their religious customs. We need to have our 21st century minds brought up to speed on the 1st century religious practices of Judaism and the Day of Atonement.

The High Priest and the Sacrificial System
The day of atonement - Yom Kippur

How long has it been since you have read Leviticus? It is not one of the more common reads for us. It contains lots of law and ceremony that is foreign to us. Leviticus 16 deals with the Day of Atonement. In the Jewish feast calendar there are seven major feasts—four in the spring, three in the fall. The fall feasts begin with the Feast of Trumpets (September 4th this past month), also called Rosh Hashanah. The Feast of Trumpets inaugurates the ten days of awe, which is ten days of repentance, of soul searching. They begin the New Year getting right with God. You fast, deny yourself, you search your heart. ***God, I want to start the New Year right. We as a community want to start the New Year by letting you clean us.***

This leads up to the Day of Atonement (September 14th this year), which is described in Leviticus 16. It's called Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur centers around several animals and the high priest. The high priest is the person who speaks on behalf of God to the people and on behalf of the people to God.

It is good to understand the picture here. Some scholars believe that at the time—this is the second temple period—you could fit 210,000 people on the temple mount. Remember that the temple is a place where the heavenly and earthly line gets blurred. The temple area is a merging of several different realms. The heavenly and the earthly are colliding. They made sure the sacred garments, linen, and the headpiece were crafted exactly how God wanted because they understood there was something unearthly going on. If you scour the ancient sources, you can find accounts of people who described what they saw. One of them is a letter to Aerasaus, a firsthand account of the high priest in action. He says:

It was an occasion of great amazement to us when we saw Eleazar engaged in his ministry and all the glorious vestments, including the wearing of the garment with precious stones upon it in which he is vested. There the priest's appearance makes one awestruck and dumbfounded. A man would think he had come out of this world into another. I emphatically assert that every man who comes near the spectacle of what I have described will experience astonishment and amazement beyond words, his very being transformed by the hallowed arrangement on every single detail.

There was something about the high priest working on the Day of Atonement in the priestly function that led people to sense, ***I am seeing another realm colliding with this realm.*** The high priest is going into God's presence on your behalf. Notice what he has to go through. Verse 6, "Aaron is to offer the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household." Aaron has to go through a series of rituals to make sure he is cleansed, power washed, sanctified; so he can go in on behalf of the people.

A goat is chosen to be the 'scapegoat' – ever wonder where that term comes from? It comes from this chapter of the Bible in Leviticus where it says the goat shall be presented alive before the Lord to be used for making atonement by sending it into the desert as a scapegoat. So, the

high priest is brought a live goat and when you see how the goat and the high priest interact it will start to bring to light what's happening.

He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat's head. He then sends the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. The goat will carry all their sins to a solitary place, and the man shall release it in the desert; the wilderness a place of exile, without rest.

Who is going to be the man appointed to the task? If this goat has the sins of all your neighbors on it, do you want to be leading that thing out into the wilderness?

Tradition has it that the man appointed to the task would be a Gentile who had no connection with the people of Israel. This only makes sense because the Jewish community, when they send that goat away, doesn't want to have anything to do with this sin saturated goat.

There was some tradition surrounding the goat and a red cord. You can only find it in a few sources. They would take a red cord—red being symbolic of blood, judgment, and punishment—and it would be placed on the head of the goat. The red cord is symbolic of your sin.

Now this may be important. Many of us think individually; we think of *my* guilt before God. The Eastern mind thinks individually but far more important would be the community. What are *we* guilty of as the people of God that needs to be placed on the head of the goat? What would it be like for churches to capture a sense *What are we guilty of?* What would it be like for a small group to say, *What do we need to confess to God?*

All of the people are placing their sin on the head of the goat. The high priest would place his hands upon the goat. Remember, this is the culmination of the ten days of awe. This is a most sacred, powerful moment when God is meeting with people and their communal guilt is placed upon the goat. It would be quiet. It would be somber. A moment when for the next year, our sins are being covered. They're being covered because God is gracious and merciful. This is a moment of unbelievable seriousness.

Then the man appointed for the task would lead the goat out into the wilderness. The word for this scapegoat is *ahzahzel*.

Ahzahzel

Ahzahzel carries with it the idea of "taking away." The Gentile appointed to the task would *ahzahze* the *ahzahzel* goat, take it away. It's removed. It's no longer here. Gone.

I wonder, does this remind you of another atonement story? It should.

Turn to Luke 23. Jesus is before a man named Pilate. Jesus' own community has said he's guilty and must be killed. They have taken what they say is guilt and placed it upon Jesus. You remember that Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged and the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. If you have a crown of thorns on your head and it punctures your skin, you're going to get what color lines around your head? Red. In Luke 23, the text says, "the

crowd shouted," and what did they shout? "Crucify him?" Yes but first they shout, "Take him away" – *Ahzahzel* – and then they shout, "Crucify him!"

Luke 18 – 24

¹⁸ But they all cried out together, "Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas"— ¹⁹ a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder. ²⁰ Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus, ²¹ but they kept shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!" ²² A third time he said to them, "Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no guilt deserving death. I will therefore punish and release him." ²³ But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. ²⁴ So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted.

If you're familiar with the Day of Atonement, Luke is saying, *there's a connection here, do you see it?* [There are some scholars who believe that this sermon on Hebrews is really a long narrative on the applications of Yom Kippur.]

Verse 24, "Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified." Jesus is led outside of the camp, the city of Jerusalem, by Gentiles. You have Jesus with a red ring around his head, the crowd chanting, "*ahzahzel, ahzahzel*" and then a Gentile leads him outside of the city, Jerusalem.

Here is the sad thing. The Jews knew and revered the Day of Atonement, but then the Day of Atonement is going to happen next year too because people keep sinning. You got to do the whole thing next year. If you have this sense, you understand the longing for a sacrifice "once and for all." Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this great Priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Jesus finished the work and the work of Jesus is finished.

Jesus finished the work and the work of Jesus is finished

Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

One last interesting word picture. One fascinating tradition comes in the Mishnah, an extra-biblical source recorded by the Jews. When the red cord placed on the goat was taken off before he was released, some believe the red cord was hung on the front of the altar, or the doorway going into the temple. Legend has it that over the next year the red cord would mysteriously turn white. Witnesses interpreted that to mean God's supernatural ability to forgive their sins.

Roughly forty years before the destruction of the temple they say the red cord stopped turning from red to white. Forty years before A.D. 70 puts you sometime around the year 30. The year Christ died for our sins, the temple sacrifice stopped working. The sacrificial system was no longer effective because it was no longer necessary. Our sin is forgiven and forever gone.

God knows about the addiction. God knows about the abortion. He knows about the break up. He knows about the fear and insecurities that you let define you. He knows that success and the desire to have people like you have held you hostage from being a witness to His Kingdom. He knows your anger and your unforgiveness. He knows your wounded-ness. God knows it, and I'm here to tell you that *the goat is gone*. It's freedom. This is the picture God gives us—*take that*

goat and send it out because it's gone and it's not coming back. God's in the freedom business. Jesus, the ultimate scapegoat, took it and it was nailed to a cross so that we would live free.

It is a power message isn't it. To be fair much of this part of the sermon is the work of Rob Bell who spins a wonderful story. I don't like everything Rob has to say but his words are true here:

One of the messages we can take away from this is when we are reminded of our failures and of our darkness, maybe our message to the world is "the goat has left the building." When somebody reminds you about your past and wants to hold your failures against you, maybe you should say, "Excuse me. I don't see a goat in the room." When people feel loaded down and ashamed and feel religion has beaten them down, maybe our word to the world is, "I got something to tell you. The goat? It's gone." Rob Bell, The goat has left the building.

Those who trust this, Hebrews says, have been made holy forever. The central redeeming message is that when you meet Jesus and you confess and you are born from above, born again, remade, then you aren't who you were. You're a new creation. The old has gone. The new has come. You have new identity. You were a sinner. And while you still stumble, you are now fundamentally defined as a saint. The message of the goat leaving the building is the story of the Scriptures. It doesn't mean we don't sin, but the Scripture keeps saying: *You are not who you were. You are a new creation. You have joined the saints. You have been rebirthed, remade, and you have been made holy forever.*

One of the reasons why many churches get so fixated on the rules is because when you lose who you are in Jesus all you're left with is a bunch of rules and sin management. Stuart Briscoe said, "If we taught people who they are in Christ, we probably wouldn't have to spend as much time telling them what to do."

What makes Jesus a ***Great High Priest*** is the degree of forgiveness:

Hebrews 5:9
... He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

So what does this mean to us?

Bishop and author William Willimon tells of an encounter he once had with a dying woman: She was in the last stages of lung cancer, gasping day after day for breath. It was obvious she was in great pain and exhausted from fighting. She clutched a crucifix daily, given to her by her grandmother when she was a girl, carved by a monk in Europe. It was a symbol of all that her Catholic faith meant to her.

When Willimon entered the room that afternoon, he could see she was very near the end.

"Would you like me to pray for you?" he asked. "Would you like me to summon a priest?"

With her last ounce of energy, she held out the crucifix toward me, which depicted the body of Christ nailed to the cross. She said, "Thank you—but I have a Priest."

We have a great priest, the very Great High Priest – Jesus Christ!

Hebrews 4:14-16 Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been

tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Let's pray.