

Forgiveness. Aphemi in the Greek, means: To send away, to release, to leave, to let go.

Hosea was a prophet in the northern kingdom and he had a peculiar and difficult call. Not only was he to preach the law and Gospel to stubborn people who didn't want to hear it. He had to live out an illustration of God's love for his people by marrying an adulterous woman. Gomer is her name and she, like the people of God, cheats on her husband. And, as we know, under the old covenant, the punishment for that is death – but no, Hosea is not told to stone his wife, he is told to win her back. Likewise God's people, though unfaithful, are still sought by God. His word goes forth to win his people back to him.

That we might say what is said in Chapter 6:1-3. Read.

What a love story that would be?

Sadly, that is not always the case as we see in verse 4, that Ephraim – the northern kingdom, and Judah, the southern, are *not* saying these words. Or at least they are saying them and maybe they mean them, for a little while. And maybe they go through the motions, but... no. Their love wains. Our love does too.

And so Hosea prophesies of the Messiah who will come and love God's people nevertheless and win them back to God.

It is a scandalous love. This love God has for his people. It is certainly underserved and I hope that might teach us two things about love and the mercy God desires. First, it is by nature undeserved. Wrongs have been done. Adultery in Hosea's case. Justice, the law of God, demands punishment. Mercy then is to release someone from the deserved punishment. And so when you are wronged you might find yourself saying something really silly like, "They don't deserve my forgiveness!" Well of course not! Forgiveness is never deserved. Justice is. But God has forgiven you. And called you to forgive others. Let. It. Go. To forgive is to release. "But that person really hurt me?" Ask Hosea about that. Did it hurt when his wife went to another man? Ask Jesus. Did it hurt when the nails went into his hands? "But they did it more than once." Ask Hosea, ask Jesus. Then let it go.

Second. I hear equally silly, statements like, "I can't forgive myself." I am sympathetic to this, because when we do wrong, well, we have to live with that don't we? But that does not actually mean the burden of justice is still on our shoulders. Because we don't make that call, the judge does. Remember, wrongdoing demands justice and who hands out the justice? The judge. And we have our judges here which are helpful yes, but when it comes, especially to matters of eternity, there is a capital J, Judge. And he has given his word to show us right and wrong, and written it on our hearts. So his verdict is really the verdict we should be quite interested in.

And if his verdict for you, Christian, is: “The Son, the Messiah, Jesus, has shed his blood for you to wash you clean, therefore this court states that you are released and forgiven from the punishment justice requires.” Well, I might be so bold as to say, who are you to put the chains back on? Is your mind stronger than the blood of Jesus? I don’t think so. Is your opinion worth more than the Judge’s verdict? Hardly. Do your feelings change whether or not a dead man was put in a tomb then risen three days later? I don’t think so. So... let. It. Go. Forgiveness means to release.

So we see in Hosea, Old Testament even, that God’s love and saving work is done by grace and through forgiveness, not by outward acts – in fact it is our acts that set us further away from God, only his forgiveness can close that gap. Paul uses a similar argument in our epistle lesson today. He shows how Abraham was saved by grace through faith, by believing God’s promise. And note the shift at the end of the reading READ 23 and 24: He says. If it worked for Abraham, this grace thing, it will work for you. How can you receive the promises of God? The same way Abraham did, by God’s grace and promise to you.

Barna Research, oh it’s been many years now, maybe even 20, did a report and found that 50% of LCMS, you, Lutherans said that they were saved, in some way, by their works. I hope those statistics have gone down in 20 years. Because folks, it’s here today in our texts: Our Salvation is undeserved and depends solely on the

mercy of God to be the faithful bridegroom who will show us mercy – and has in his Son who died to wash us clean. Those promises are yours.

The Cross of Jesus is right to be on our walls and in our homes. There we can be reminded of His steadfast, covenant, sacrificial, forgiving love. Here at the cross we are protected from both ditches that threaten us. The “works” ditch is the ditch of the pharisees who were mad at Jesus for hanging out with tax collectors and “sinners.” “They weren’t good enough to deserve God’s mercy” – we’ve talked about that redundant statement right? Go back to Hosea you pharisees! And wouldn’t you know, that’s who Jesus quotes to them – Hosea – Go and learn ‘I desire mercy not sacrifice.’

The other ditch, however, is antinomianism, anti-law, “we don’t need to preach right and wrong. God forgives so why worry about it?” Well, first, because it hurts people, and second, because God certainly cares about it. But the cross is the antidote to this too! Because if you come across someone who wants to say sin isn’t real or no big deal, or we should just lighten up about it. If they say, “Jesus just hung out with sinners so why are you all clutching your pearls?”

I’d say, first of all Jesus calls those sinners “sick.” And I’m pretty sure it’s nearly illegal to call certain sins a sickness anymore. So I don’t think he is affirming and approving the sins, even though he is accepting the people – and there is a

difference. Second, again, the cross. If sin is no big deal. Then why the nails? Why the whips? Why the blood? Why the darkness and forsakenness and betrayal and death? Death is a big deal. And That death on a cross, is a huge deal – it changes the universe. And if your sin is no big deal, why'd we need a Savior? Why'd he need to suffer for you?

No, sin is a big deal. The ones out there, and the ones in here. It's every tear Hosea shed in his marriage or you in yours. Sin did that. It's every doubt Abraham and his wife had waiting for their baby. It's every lonely depressing thought, every pain, every funeral. And we have it, we can't beat it. We are done, guilty, lost. Chains grabs us and drag us under...

Unless someone comes to save. Unless a great physician comes to pay the price, to wash us clean, and then to take up our sins spread them to the wind, and *let them go*. May that forgiveness cover our pasts, our homes, our relationships. To forgive means to release. Your sins - child of God who confess his name, baptized in his name - your sins are undeservedly, gone, carried away, released. He has promised it. He has effected it in Jesus. There is no punishment for you any longer. The verdict is in. Be free.