

First Presbyterian Church
Sermon for June 21, 2026
Preacher: Dan Crump

In our scripture this morning from Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul makes a strong argument for a forgiveness of sins, the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, that is universal. This is not as is usually thought, a suspension of God's wrath for some, but an expression of God's love to all. I have underlined several lines in your bulletin to call to your attention. The "many" that died through Adam's trespass is the same "many" that have the gift of grace. One man's trespass condemns "all." One man's obedience leads to life for "all." The many is the many. All is all. It is quite clear. It does not depend upon a declaration of faith or any other action. It is not our "faith in Jesus Christ" as Paul's text is usually misinterpreted, but "the faithfulness of Jesus Christ," as Paul actually wrote in the Greek, that has secured our forgiveness. Our institutions, religious, political, and financial have been built - from the beginning - on claiming the power to condemn and to justify. Paul declares this claim to be false. God condemns no one. It took the crucifixion and resurrection of God's Messiah, Jesus, for people like Paul to see it.

This is the good news of Paul. And it is "good news." God's judgment does not come first. God's forgiveness does, and God's love comes before that. Paul never once mentions a hell of eternal torment, although he does speak of the destruction coming to "those who do not obey the gospel" when, as he believed, Jesus returns to take the faithful home. When that

happens, we will see if Paul was right about who gets destroyed, but, I think we can all admit to the destruction that ensues from our claiming to have earned God's forgiveness, and then claiming the right to call down God's condemnation on everyone else. Until Jesus returns, all we really have from Paul is "You are forgiven. Live like it. Now."

Let's move to our second scripture of the morning, Matthew 10:24-39. This is Jesus' missionary discourse, his instructions for the disciples before sending them out.

"A disciple is not above the teacher
nor a slave above the master;
it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher
and the slave like the master.
If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul,
how much more will they malign those of his household!
So have no fear of them,
for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered
and nothing secret that will not become known.
What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light,
and what you hear whispered,
proclaim from the housetops.
Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul;
rather, fear the one who can destroy both
soul and body in hell.
Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?
Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.
And even the hairs of your head are all counted.
So do not be afraid;

you are of more value than many sparrows.
Everyone, therefore, who acknowledges me before others,
I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven,
but whoever denies me before others,
I also will deny before my Father in heaven.
Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth;
I have not come to bring peace but a sword.
For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law,
and one's foes will be members
of one's own household.
Whoever loves father or mother more than me
is not worthy of me,
and whoever loves son or daughter more than me
is not worthy of me,
and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me
is not worthy of me.
Those who find their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

For the word of God in scripture, for the word of God within us, for
the word of God among us.

Thanks be to God.

So, yeah, . . . Happy Father's Day! This really is one of the
lectionary texts for today, and it falls on Father's Day fairly often.
Luke's gospel goes even farther, telling us to hate our parents.

Honor your parents? Hate your parents? There is something about these biblical contradictions that really grabs me. They offer a practice that takes these texts *seriously*, but cannot ignore how dangerous it is to take any of them *literally*. They constantly pull the rug out from under any attempt at certainty. They make it pretty difficult to stand up here and say anything at all. Call me crazy, but I like it.

Let's begin with Paul who, as noted in Romans 5 and 6, speaks of God's universal forgiveness through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, yet two chapters later, speaks of predestination, traditionally thought of as some, only God knows who, being forgiven and some not. Tradition comes into question, however, if we think of forgiveness as a universal free gift and discipleship as an individual call to respond to that gift. Think about universal forgiveness for a moment. Unearned, freely given, for all people, in fact, for all of creation. Have your eyes blinded and your plans shattered on the road to where you thought you were going by the realization, completely apart from your own effort or any merit you might have earned, and in total spite of any judgment for or against you that the world's systems has meted out, that the only one who can judge you, has not just forgiven you, but loves you unconditionally, . . . and, in that instant, you realize everyone else is not just forgiven, but loved, too; and you realize if they are forgiven, and loved, you have no excuse not to forgive them and love them as well.

You might start to think others would like to know that they are loved, freely and unconditionally, just as you know you are. It might begin as a blurry vision as if in a darkened room or a whisper you aren't even sure you heard, but it doesn't stay in the

dark. It will find its way to the rooftop. It is dangerously easy at this point to buy the lie that I have acquired something nobody else has. Should I share it? Should I keep it for my own benefit? Should I do both by trying to profit from sharing? The only safe approach to these questions is to remember - God's unconditional love comes from God alone, and it is given to all. The only thing we even have to share is the change its revelation makes in our own lives. The blinding clarity of revelation is the call to discipleship.

I think this is what Paul means by "those who do not obey the gospel." He does prescribe destruction for them when Jesus returns to take the faithful home. Well, that's Paul, "God love him," and maybe, one day we will see whether he was right or wrong. But he is right about one thing; if the revelation of God's love and forgiveness for all visits you and your life does not, afterward, reflect the revelation, there are consequences. Pray that you will weather those consequences long enough to eventually answer that call. We should be clear who calls and what is demanded of us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer offers some clarity in his book, The Cost of Discipleship. He tells us Jesus is the one who calls, and the content of that call consists of two words, "Follow me." Christ must first call, for the step can only be taken at his word. From that point, Bonhoeffer says, "We must take a definite step." Christ's call is irrevocable and the response must be as well. This is what is meant by losing your life and finding it. "[O]nly the man who is dead to his own will can follow Christ," Bonhoeffer says. And, for Bonhoeffer, only the one who follows Christ can live the one-of-a-kind life God created them to live.

That step takes us through what a zen teacher might call The Gateless Gate. Master Mumon offers a poem:

"Gateless is the Great Way,
There are thousands of ways to it.
If you pass through this barrier,
You may walk freely in the universe"

Jesus identifies that gate, in John's gospel, chapter 10 verse 9, "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in, *and go out*, and find pasture." Master Mumon asks, "If it is gateless, how can you pass through it?" Paul's gospel similarly implies, "If you are already forgiven, how can you earn forgiveness?" The answer, you might already be able to guess, is that you are already have it; the map says, "You Are Already Here." Bonhoeffer says, "Everything depends on the first step." And, we might add, every step afterwards is a first step through the gateless gate, Jesus.

Bonhoeffer cautions, "we can only take this step aright if we fix our eyes not on the work we do, but on the word with which Jesus calls us to do it." In other words, we must not mistake any step toward any particular goal for taking that perpetually first step through Jesus, the gateless gate. Matthew's Jesus says, "A disciple is not above the teacher." The disciple's task is to follow. Any goal can never come between the one who follows and the one who is followed. ". . . [I]t is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher." To be like the teacher is to be indistinguishable from the teacher. I hope Matthew's phrase, "whoever loves father more than me is not *worthy* of me" raises a red flag for you. It is a confused, if not coercive translation. The Greek word translated as "worthy" actually translates, "of equal measure," in others

words, "the same". Discipleship calls us to a faithfulness equal to the one that, for Paul, calls forth God's universal forgiveness. Perhaps that is what the resurrected Jesus meant when he told his disciples in that locked room that whoever they forgive is forgiven, whoever they don't, is not.

Maybe Jesus' very non-Hallmark family values are beginning to come into focus. Whoever loves father or mother more than Jesus, cannot love them any more than their own accounting of how much love their parents deserve. To love Jesus more is to love as God does, unconditionally, and for all.

So, I can hear you thinking, "Dan, this discipleship business sounds pretty tricky, and the stakes are high. I hope you have a Zen koan that will help."

I do.

This one comes from a book of koans compiled by Master Mumon himself, called the Mumonkan. Case 19.

Joshu once asked Nansen, "What is the Way?"

Nansen answered, "Ordinary mind is the Way."

"Then should we direct ourselves toward it or not?," asked Joshu.

"If you try to direct yourself toward it, you go away from it," answered Nansen.

Joshu continued, "If we do not try, how can we know that it is the Way?"

Nansen replied, "The Way does not belong to knowing or to not knowing. Knowing is illusion; not knowing is blankness. If you really attain to the Way of no-doubt, it is like the great

void, so vast and boundless. How then can there be right and wrong in the Way?"

At these words, Joshu was suddenly enlightened.

Joshu asks his teacher, Nansen, the same question Thomas asks Jesus in John 14, "How can we know the way?" Nansen answers Joshu with one of the most famous sayings in Zen, "Ordinary mind is the way." Ordinary mind. There is a natural quality, a basic way of seeing that places no obstacle, no abstraction, no meaning or moral judgment whatsoever between the one who sees and the one who is seen. The disciple relinquishes everything that prevents him from following the teacher. In this natural state, it becomes almost impossible to distinguish between the two, the one who sees and the one who is seen, the one who follows and the one who is followed. Make any effort to grasp or understand this, however, and they are worlds apart. If you try to direct your steps toward the way, you create countless other ways. If you do not take the first step, there is no way at all.

Jesus answers Thomas, "I am the way." There is no way, but the way. It is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher. Thanks be to God. Amen.