

“Sin and death – Forgiveness and Life”

Did the Old Testament reading from Habakkuk sound eerily familiar to you? The prophet looks around and sees all kinds of violence and destruction – sin running rampant – and the world seemingly going to hell in a handbasket. “Why Lord? Why don’t you do something? Why do you idly stand by?” Sound familiar, like questions you might ask?

The Lord HAS done something about the wickedness of the world – and in the Gospel reading for today – we learn that He IS doing something about it.

The days of Habakkuk are no different than our day – in that wickedness abounds. Jesus tells us that – “Temptation are sure to come.” They are a given in this fallen world in which we live. But notice what Jesus says – “WOE to the one through whom they come.”

When you hear Jesus say WOE – it’s meant to stop you in your tracks. “WOE to the one through whom [the temptations to sin] come. It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin.”

Did you hear that?!? “It would be BETTER” to be mill-stoned than to cause someone to sin!!! We don’t think sin is all that serious – but Jesus does. God’s Word teaches us that “sin=death.” To cause someone to sin is to cause their death. No wonder Jesus cries WOE!!! But there’s more.

“If your brother sins, rebuke him.” Why? Because his sin is deadly. “If he repents, forgive him.” To forgive sin is to release someone from death. “And if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.” We hear this and think he’s gone too far – seven times in a day – Jesus can’t be serious – but He is, deadly serious!

Notice that Jesus doesn't say anything about investigating the brother's repentance to see if he is sincere – He just says, "forgive him." But we don't like that one bit – if we forgive him, if we "let him go" – then he'll get away with sin. And if sin=death, then it's like he's getting away with murder.

But Jesus doesn't listen to our arguments and change His mind, change His Word. He stands firm. If your brother repents, "forgive him."

As our text continues, St. Luke now shifts from the more general term "disciple" to the "apostles." He speaks of the apostles – the "sent ones" – the ones authorized and sent by Christ to "forgive the sins of those who repent, and to withhold forgiveness from those who do not repent" --- it's the apostles who cry out, "increase our faith!"

What you're commanding us to do, Jesus, we can't do it – it's impossible. "We should go about it this way – investigating and diagnosing the quality of their repentance – making them prove they are truly repentant. Wouldn't that be better?"

No, it wouldn't. Jesus' Word stands firm. And there's no need to "increase" their faith – as if all they needed to do were some spiritual exercises to bulk up their faith – and then they could forgive the repentant brother.

No, Jesus says, "If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it would obey you.'"

The problem is not having enough faith – rather – it is having the faith of which Jesus speaks. The problems with the apostles', and often our own faith – is the object of that faith. One's faith is only as good as the object of that faith. Faith is always a trust in something – the question is, faith in what?

The problem with the apostles (and us), is that we see this duty to forgive as something we do. We are the object – we have to trust ourselves to get the job done – but that's impossible FOR US.

And that's just it – it is not US, but CHRIST who forgives. It's His work. The problem is that we don't trust His forgiveness – we don't trust that it will make a difference – that it will change anything – we treat forgiveness as a nothing.

But it does change things! Just as surely as Jesus could tell a mulberry tree to be uprooted – and it would happen – so also, when Jesus forgives the one who repents – it happens! They are forgiven. They are let go. They are set free from sin, and therefore, death.

Folks, this is the antidote to death – Christ forgiving sin. It is Christ who took all your sin, even tempting others to sin – Christ, who became sin for you – Christ who shed His blood and gave up His life to pay the debt of all sin – Christ who now “lives and reigns,” forgiving you and giving you life.

Like the servant who comes in from the field – Christ tells you to do your duty. The Ten Commandments, along with your vocation in life – tell you what your duty is – how you are to love your neighbor. Jesus tells His disciples – “pay attention to yourselves” – rebuke [your brother who sins] – and forgive him when he repents ... even seven times a day.

And when you have done all that you were commanded, say, “We are unworthy servants, we have only done what is our duty.” Indeed, I am an unworthy servant, only doing what the Lord has given me to do – and all the while, trusting that He will do what His Word says.

And so, Christ Himself gathers you to His Table – to recline with Him as He feeds you with His life-giving forgiveness. With His very own resurrected Body and Blood – He unwraps the millstones of sin that you have been dragging around – setting you free from death – and giving you His life everlasting. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.