

Reminiscere
25 February, Anno Domini 2018
St. Matthew 15:21-28
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

All of us have painful memories and unspeakable sins of thought and deed that we wish we could just forget. Those bitter words spoken in anger, the time someone else took the fall for our mistake because we didn't tell the truth, the physical and emotional trauma we have suffered at the hands of others. We want to just forget it all and live our days as though those things never happened. We don't want to remember them. We want to turn away and never look back, never be reminded of the terrible pain and suffering.

But we can't. They constantly haunt us. Satan taunts us with them, dangling them in front of us and reminding us just exactly who we are and what we've done. "This, this is what you've done. This is who you REALLY are. You may have everyone else fooled, but you know. You know the truth. You know that what you did was vile, evil, unthinkable. Good people don't do what you've done. And you know what you deserve. You know that God saw. You know what God's word says. It says people who do the things you've done don't go to heaven. It says right there in the Bible 'Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger rivalries, dissensions, division, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.' Your finger prints are all over that list."

Simply forgetting such things isn't enough. They happened. You did them. And the death they bring with them is real. A sudden case of amnesia will not erase your sins from before the eyes of God. He does not slumber or sleep or forget. It is utterly foolish to imagine that God will simply turn a blind eye and pretend as though your sins never happened, that He will look the other way and ignore the fact that your heart is turned against Him and lusts after every evil day and night. God is just. Sin must be punished. And the devil knows it. He knows that there is absolutely nothing more terrifying than to stand in front of the throne of divine justice covered in nothing but your sin and your guilt.

This is what the patriarch Jacob experienced that night near the Jabbok as he fought his mysterious attacker. I believe Luther is right when he argues that the pre-incarnate Christ, as he wrestled with Jacob physically, was also assailing Jacob spiritually with the bitter reminder of how he cheated Esau and deceived his father Isaac. The Lord, no doubt, would have flooded Jacob's ears with thoughts of Esau's great bitterness and desire for retribution for the stolen birthright. There was no forgetting for Jacob, only painful, terrifying remembering. There was no forgetting for the Canaanite woman. She was a sinner. She had lived all that time in unbelief. She worshiped idols. And now she wanted God to help her, to rescue her from the very demons that she had all but invited into their lives through her idolatry?! What possible reason could she have to believe that He would? What leg would she have to stand on as she approached God seeking His help?

None. But she approached anyway. Jacob wrestled on even though things seemed completely hopeless and he knew he deserved to die there that night. Neither of them could stand on a moral high ground. Neither of them would dare to assert some kind of claim upon God because of their own righteousness. Their relentlessness had nothing to do with them. It have everything to do with what God had said about Himself. Jacob's father and grandfather had long told him of God's mercy and promises, that from the beginning God had revealed Himself as gracious and forgiving, promising salvation to all who had just cast themselves into the jaws of death. The Canaanite woman believed the reports she had been hearing about this Jesus who was going around having mercy on all who were sick and oppressed by demons, who forgave sins. Nothing would keep these saints from demanding that God be true to who He is, regardless of who they were.

That alone drove these two Christians to relentlessly pursue God, a God who by every worldly measure should want to have nothing, nothing to do with us. A God who, by all rights, should simply let us drown in the filth and death which we have covered ourselves in. "Remember not my sins, but your mercy, O Lord! I am a wretch. I will not argue that point. You are right when you say that my heart is filled with all kinds of evil, shameful things. I cannot disagree. But you, O Lord, you yourself have said that you are merciful, that you forgive and heal, that you give life to the dead. You have insisted and promised with countless promises that you will receive

repentant sinners into your favor. You have expressly said that you take no pleasure in my death or eternal destruction though I most certainly deserve it. You, O God, have promised your steadfast love. Remember that and only that.”

Dear Christian, that is what you are to remember. Remember God's promises. Relentlessly remember that you are Baptized, that you bear the seal of the water and the +cross, and that there God made you an eternal promise, a promise infinitely greater than you and infinitely greater than your sin. He promised that your sins are no longer yours because He Himself would take them away from you. Christ Jesus has laid claim to them and made full payment for them. Who you are and what you have done never have been and never will be the cause of God's love for you. God's promises would be irrelevant if they were rooted in your character and your moral rectitude. Those are the promises of the Law - if you do this, God will do this. If you don't, God's wrath will condemn you forever. By those measures, Jacob would have been destroyed and the woman and her daughter would have suffered the eternal torment of demons.

But they didn't. That is the point. Again and again, God demonstrates that He is filled with compassion and steadfast love. Time and again God does not deal with sinners as they deserve. Time and again God shows His great joy in giving life to those dead in their sin and trespasses, in receiving back those who have wandered, in forgiving the endless stream of our sins. THAT IS WHO HE IS!

God will not forget that. That would be to forget Himself and make Himself a liar. He cannot and He will not do that. We need to remember that. When the flood of our guilt sweeps over us, when our sins are staring us back in the face and the terror of eternal judgment threatens to destroy us, remember - remember what God has done for sinners. As Bach so beautifully writes in the St. John Passion “Hurry, you tormented souls, leave your dens of torment, Hurry—Where to?—to Golgotha! Take the wings of faith, Fly—Where to?— to the hill of the cross, there your salvation flourishes!” Remember the cross in the way Christ has given “Take, eat; take, drink in remembrance of me.”

Your heavenly Father doesn't want you to wonder about His love and His mercy. He has already demonstrated it to you, to the world, in the clearest, most uncertain terms - He laid all of your sins on His sinless Son along with

the condemnation your sin deserved. He nailed His Son to the cross and abandoned Him so that you might be absolutely certain that He will never abandon you, even when it seems that He Himself has turned against you as it seemed to Jacob and the Canaanite woman. God will not remember your sins. He has removed them as far from you from east is from west and cast them out of His sight forever. He doesn't glance back at them or hold on to them just in case. The absolution is absolute. There is no reason for you to doubt it. Cling to it. Remind God of it every day. Remind Satan of it every day. Remind yourself of it every day. This is why your Lord graciously gives you and invites you to the very thing your wearied soul so desperately longs for - to be reminded that God is merciful and He still has forgiven your sins through confession and absolution.

This is why we pray. BECAUSE God hears. Because God does not look at our sins or deny our prayers because of them. On the contrary, God wants you to conquer Him with His own promises. God wants you to tenaciously hold on to Him and not let go even it when seems that He is trying to walk away. Stay with Him. Don't give up. Don't let go. The promises of God will never change. You are being heard. You may be being tested. Who you are and how you are suffering are not ever how God wants you to know or measure His love and His mercy. Don't let these deter or distract you. The Word declared to you - that and that alone is how you are to know and measure God.

If you will not know God through His promises, if you will only pray when you determine that you are worthy to be heard then you only invite God's wrath because you deny all that Christ Jesus has done for you, to reconcile you to God and to reveal to you God's steadfast love. This is the greatest insult to God, this is the highest blasphemy - to give any of the glory of your salvation and preservation which belongs only to God your heavenly Father and His Son to yourself or your own goodness. Repent and lay down your idols and trust only in the Blood of Jesus.

Let this and this alone be your comfort, your strength, and your assurance - that God has promised in His Word that He will not remember your sins or hold them against you because Jesus Christ has already made full satisfaction for them. You have no reason to doubt that - not affliction, not death, not sadness, not even the appearance of God's anger. Let none of these steal this Word of truth from your heart - "It is finished!" God's mercy is for you and He will answer your cries for help and deliverance in due

time and season. Cry out more, insist on His help. He will remember you and He will remember His promises to you and He will come to your rescue.

In the Name of +Jesus.