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2/24/2008

Text: *"but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Romans 5. 8*

Grace, peace, and mercy from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is said (and I strongly agree) that the World War II generation, which includes some of you here at Rock of Ages, is the "greatest generation" in the history of our nation. The more I think of it though, I have to suggest (and I don't expect anyone to agree with me) that this country has had three "greatest generations" - the Revolutionary War generation that built this country; the post Civil War generation who had to rebuild this country; and of course the WWII generation who saved this country. None of them are perfect and we have good and bad in all generations. But these three stand out.

While all war is horrible, the American Civil War which took place from 1861-1865, in my opinion, was the worst war in our country's history, not only because of the number of casualties and destruction, but also because of how it tore apart families and friendships creating rifts that in many ways are still felt in our land to this day. Hate and politics set American against American. Satan must have been having a field day during those times.

I would like to suggest even further that maybe the Post Civil War generation could quite possibly be the greatest because of what they had to do enabling the United States to survive as a nation, that is, the ability to *forgive ack9fh*. Not foreign powers, but *lch12iLwt*. Family and friends who were estranged throughout those years, for the most part, came together again. This happened some after the Revolutionary War as well, but not to the degree it *had to* happen after 1865.

A story I love about this has been handed down by the wife of Confederate General George Pickett.

George Pickett and Abraham Lincoln were very close friends, who knew each other in Illinois before the war. But, when war broke out, George joined the southern army. Dashing, daring, and brave, unfortunately General Pickett is remembered the most for the charge he led on day three of the battle of Gettysburg in 1863. I'm sure you have read about it or have seen re-enactments of "Pickett's Charge" on TV or in movies. Thirteen to fifteen thousand Confederate soldiers

attacked Union forces up a ridge in a battle line over a mile long and over an open field a mile wide without any cover whatsoever. Union cannon loaded with shell and grapeshot canister (like big shotgun shells), along with thousands of Union muskets, cut the Confederates down. General Pickett was destroyed emotionally by seeing his men slaughtered like they were. The failure of the attack was the turning point in the war to the Union's favor.

Toward the close of the war as the Union had possession of a large part of Virginia, President Lincoln paid a visit to General Pickett's Virginia home. Mrs. Pickett said that she answered the door with her baby in her arms.

"Is this George Pickett's home?" he asked.

With all the courage and dignity she could muster, Mrs. Pickett replied, "Yes, and I am his wife, and this is his baby."

"I am Abraham Lincoln."

"The President!" she gasped. She recalled that she had never met him before but knew the intense love and reverence with which her husband George had always spoke of him.

Shaking his head, he replied, "No, Abraham Lincoln, George's old friend."

She said that the baby pushed away from her and reached out to Mr. Lincoln, who took him into his arms, and as he did so, she recalled that an expression of rapt, almost divine tenderness and love lighted up Lincoln's sad face, a look that she had never seen on any other face. Then the baby opened his mouth wide and insisted upon giving his father's friend a dewy kiss. As the President gave the baby back to Mrs. Pickett, he said to the child,

"Tell your father, the rascal, that I forgive him for the sake of your bright eyes."

I don't know if Abraham Lincoln was a Christian or not, some say yes while others say no, but he often lead by example with Christian virtues.

I was reminded of this story because our scripture readings are about forgiveness as well.

We as a people, and I am talking about the human race, are a miserable lot. Because of original sin, we cannot help ourselves. From the nicest person to the foulest of wretches, we are all the same in this sense- we sin. And sin comes in many ways.

In Catechism class, a while back, we were talking about the Close of the Commandments, and on the page we were looking at, page 62 in our "Growing as God's People" book, there is a sin tree. The roots are "original sin." Sin inherited from Adam and Eve, that runs through our very being. We all have it - no one is exempt.

Because we are born with this we cannot keep God's Law, which is required to go to heaven and not to hell. As the trunk shoots up from the ground, that is "actual sin." Sins we commit when we break God's Law by our actions, words, thoughts, or feelings. Then the tree branches out with "sins of commission" - breaking God's Law by doing something we know we shouldn't do, and "sins of omission" - when we do not do something we should do or sins we commit that we are not even aware of. The fruit of this tree is simply "death." We all eat the fruit, and for that we are all going to die. It is the punishment for sin. Even though God loves sinners, He must condemn and punish them because of their sins. Two types of death occur because of sin - death now and death forever.

Spiritual death separates people from God in this life, causing a bad conscience and much suffering, leading to physical death. Eternal death is the greatest penalty for sin by being cut off from God forever in hell.

It's not a pretty picture, but sometimes the truth isn't so pretty. This is what we would all have to look forward to if God hadn't given us hope right from the very beginning after sin entered into this world, in the words of Genesis 3:15 right after the "fall" when God dealt with this new problem for His creation saying to the serpent (the devil),

*"And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."*

God promised to send a Savior who would take care of sin. The Messiah.

The promise of the Messiah, for the people of the Old Testament, and *the fulfillment* of the promise, Jesus Christ who lived a perfect life, died on a cross for our sins, and rose again from the grave taking our sins away - for the people of the New Testament.

God had to punish sin, but out of love for His undeserving creation, He chose to have mercy and take care of it Himself. That is the message of our scripture readings for today. Undeserved forgiveness.

For me, it never gets old reading about Moses and the people in the desert when God delivered them out of Egypt. What an example of God's love and mercy. After all God had done, miraculously, saving the people over and over, they still couldn't just trust God so they again grumbled and complained. Kinda like people today huh? Moses was even at his wits end with them. So God, out of love, took charge and told Moses

what to do.

The Lord told Moses to pass before the people so they could see him, grab some elders and take the staff Moses had used before when God did miracles, and go to the rock at Horeb. God tells Moses, "I will stand before you on the rock, and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out and the people will drink." All went as planned and the folks drank. God didn't have to do this but He did. He got personally involved. He still does in many ways today in our lives even when we don't deserve it.

Jesus (the Son of God who is God) got personal with the woman at the well. In this Gospel story He didn't look down on her, He talked with her and told her things, even though for the times she had three strikes against her - she was a woman, a Samaritan, and an outcast in her town. Jesus didn't have to associate with her.

If you read further into the account in the bible, when His disciples came back they couldn't believe He was talking with her. But she was honest, not trying to hide secrets, and she was bold professing her faith. How many of us tell strangers flat out what we believe? Jesus even shared truths with her about the coming church and told her plainly that He was the Messiah. He didn't share that information with many outside his disciples. It doesn't say if Jesus forgave her of all her sins, but we do know from the bible that faith is credited as righteousness.

Paul talks a lot about that in the New Testament. In Romans Chapter Five he begins,

*"Therefore, since we have been justified led by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God."*

The word justified here means the same as when the term righteousness is used concerning faith, meaning forgiveness. Paul says that gives us peace with God because of Jesus. Paul continues with even more,

*"More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."*

Even the sufferings we have in this life are beneficial for us as the Holy spirit is given to us even more so. It gets better,

*“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person--though perhaps for a good person one would dare even --to die--but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*

We don't deserve forgiveness from God. He forgives us anyway because of Jesus and what He did for us on the cross -- dying and then rising from the grave three days later claiming victory over death and the devil, taking our sins away. He even gives us the Holy Spirit so that we may believe and live in His grace, His mercy, His love --His forgiveness. I want to encourage you to cherish this free gift of salvation and share undeserved forgiveness with each other also as you live your lives.

Toward the end of April in 1865 after the American Civil War was over, a crowded church in Richmond, Virginia was having a service in which Holy Communion was being offered. When the call arose to come forward, an elderly black man came up to receive the sacrament. He was alone kneeling at the altar, waiting, but no one else joined him at God's table and the reverend was hesitant. Another old man rose from the back of the church, walked slowly (more from weariness than anything) to the altar rail and knelt beside his Christian brother, and both received the Lord's Supper together.

The man who came up second was Confederate General Robert E. Lee.

Ephesians 4:32 says,

“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Amen.

Now may the grace, love, and *forgiveness* of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you always. Amen.