

"A Word from the Cross: Forgive"

One of the best books I have ever read is actually a children's book entitled Because of Winn Dixie by Kate DiCamillo. It is about a little girl name India Opal Buloni who moves with her father, The Preacher, to the small, fictional town of Naomi, Florida. Opal's mother ran off when she was a baby, leaving a huge hole in her life. The book begins as she goes off to the grocery store to get a tomato rice for her father and comes home with a big, ugly dog whom she names Winn-Dixie.

Throughout the book, Opal collects a group misfits as her unlikely friends. One is Otis, who runs the pet store where Opal helps out to pay for the leash and collar that Winn Dixie proudly wears. Another is the local librarian, Miss Franny Brock. Then there is Gloria Dump who is nearly blind but sees with her heart. Opal checks out books from Miss Franny and then reads them to Gloria.

One day, Opal tells Gloria that has has learned that Otis spent some time in prison and wonders if she should be afraid of him. It is at this time that the wise, old Gloria Dump, leads Opal to the back of her yard to see the huge tree that has bottles hanging from every branch. Gloria tells her that the bottles keep away the ghosts of all the things she has done wrong in her life. Opal is astounded as she tells Gloria that she cannot imagine that she has done THAT MANY bad things, as she is the nicest person Opal has ever met.

In response, Gloria passes on some wise words and some of the best theology that I have ever heard. She says, with regards to people and their pasts, "You can't judge people by what they done. You got to judge them by what they're doing now!" Whether she understood it or not, Gloria had a real handle on the meaning of Lent and Ash Wednesday.

But even more than that, Gloria's words are reminiscent of the words that the Lord gave to his people through the prophet Isaiah. The children of Israel had been taken into Babylon as punishment for their sins. They had not lived as covenant people. They had worshiped other gods and not demonstrated the love of Yahweh, the God of their forefathers, to the people that they encountered. They had done nothing to be a light to the Gentiles, as God had charged them to do.

The consequences of their actions had landed them as reluctant visitors in Babylon, where they would remain as a people for 70 years. And while they were treated fairly, and even allowed to hold jobs and buy property, the sacred center that held their world together had been destroyed. The Temple in Jerusalem was no more. So while they had a certain amount of freedom, they had no political or religious power.

In fact, it was at this time that the feelings of chaos in their lives led an unknown Israelite to pen the words of this Psalm. "By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" Do you hear the sadness, the melancholy, the utter despair in their cries? Of course, you do. Because at one time or another, we have all wondered if God has given up on us? We have all thought to ourselves that there is no way God can forgive something we have said or done. We have all cringed with regret at the sins of our omissions. We have all struggled with forgiving someone else. Yet, God sent these words to them and us that God does not look back and neither should we.

"Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old" came the reply of the Lord to his children living in Exile. Or in other words, I am not going to judge you for the things you done! I will only judge you for what you are doing now!

But the Israelites, being mere mortals, did just that. They looked back at what could not be changed. They lamented over their past sins, their inability to follow the commandments that Moses gave them which he said very plainly would lead to blessings and life. They grieved the negative influence that others had on them or the people who had acted unjustly towards those they loved. Just like we look back on the mistakes we made last year and last Sunday and yesterday and this morning! We lament to ourselves with those two useless words – "IF ONLY".

If only she had been kinder . . . if only I had not judged so harshly . . . if only he had told me the truth . . . if only the doctor had looked more carefully at the MRI . . . if only he hadn't been driving after dark . . . and on and on, we, too, judge the things that others and we have done.

Jesus left a powerful example for us with regards to our past mistakes as he hung, dying on the cross. In a word: forgive. He did not even judge the people who gathered around to watch the spectacle that was being made of his life. And he had so much more to judge than we do. You see the people who feared Jesus, the people who did not take the time to understand his radical call to love and his examples of inclusiveness and forgiveness arrested him for blasphemy and treason.

And his own followers were so afraid of what might happen to them if they spoke the truth about who he was and about the miracles that they had witnessed, stood by silently and watched him receive punishment for a crime he did not commit.

But Jesus understood their weakness as he understands ours too. And so *as* he hung on the cross, dying for you and me, he offered this word about all of us. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And in saying this, he echoed the words that the Heavenly Father had sent through Isaiah when he said to the Exiles, "I, I AM HE, WHO BLOTS

OUT YOUR TRANSGRESSIONS AND I WILL NOT REMEMBER YOUR SINS." Jesus said I am not judging you for the things you done, I will only judge you for the things you do now!

So friends, Ash Wednesday is our time to hold on to these wonderful promises. Promises given to a people in despair and promises made by our savior at the time of his death. Ash Wednesday is a time to examine our lives very honestly and closely and to understand how we can make today better instead of wasting time lamenting over what happened yesterday.

One of the devotions I read last week said, "If we have one foot in the regrets of yesterday and one foot in the worries of tomorrow, we have nothing left to stand on today." Jesus wants us to stand in today believe the Gospel of forgiveness.

But please understand one important thing. Ash Wednesday is not just about forgiveness, it is also about repentance – about doing better. And while we are not called to dwell on the past, we must recognize our sinfulness in order to make today better. So Ash Wednesday and Lent and repentance are not just about simply going around and saying you are sorry. Repentance calls us to a new way of life.

I like the way that Frederick Buechner explains it. "To repent is to come to you senses," he says. Then he adds, "It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, 'I'm sorry' and more time looking to the future and saying, "WOW!'.."

I think what Buechner means is that repentance involves change. It does not mean boasting about how you were able to say I am sorry but realizing that if you completely change the way you think and act with regard to an area of sinfulness in your life, you can say "WOW. Look what God has done with me now!"

It is my prayer that tonight's service will be more than symbolic for everyone here. I hope that we will do more than write something on the pieces of paper we've been given, drop them in the bowl and feel forgiven. Because the ashes are not just a symbol of our worship but a reminder of the hope that Jesus offers in this word from the cross. It is my prayer that whatever area of your life that you have chosen to reflect on during Lent, that you will remember that Jesus' word is not a word of judgment but a word of encouragement.

As you come forward for the imposition of ashes, Dave and I will say to you, "Repent and believe the Gospel!" Repent is what Jesus calls us to do every day when we claim to be his disciples. And the Gospel, the good news, is that forgiveness is free to everyone who believes in it. And that means that the grace that liberated the Israelites from Exile is the same grace that Jesus offers on the cross. And to disregard this gift not only disregards the *words* of Jesus Christ but cheapens his very precious blood. Amen.