

Discipleship Moment

Sermon Text: Matthew 4:1-11

I grew up in the church. I was surrounded by a church family that loved and cared for me. But, even though this church was like my family, I still came to church every Sunday morning and Wednesday evening with the same impression: dress up, smile lots, and enjoy my time at church. I had never been told anything else. I enjoyed spending time with people and meeting new people and when I was in high school I began to help lead the youth group, so I was in front of the crowd from a young age. I loved the attention and small talk, the games and chatter. But underneath the broad smiles and laughs, I was often distressed because my mind and my emotions did not match the smile on my face. After the smiles and fun of Sunday, I would feel a deep despair about my sin, about my mistakes. I knew the thoughts I was having as a young man were not Godly, I knew that my arrogance towards others (sometimes my friends)—that I was smarter, stronger, and more talented than they, was not Godly. I had bad thought spirals I couldn't get rid of that would lead me to bitterness and pride. My high school, college, and into my professional life was marked by this duality, this struggle.

As we prepare to commemorate the Reformation this coming Sunday, we will hear the story of Martin Luther, who struggled with this same issue. He was a monk, a man who devoted his life to prayer and good works. But, as he was praying and working in the monastery, he was racked with guilt, with the thoughts he had, and, when he was able to not sin during the day, he had inappropriate dreams at night. All this led to a depressive, anxiety ridden conscience. He couldn't get away from his sin, and he was in constant fear of God, believing the God was waiting for him to mess up, would zap him with lightening or strike him with the plague. He was a man who, like all of us, was struck with an unsettled conscience.

We believe this about God is because we experience this from humans around us. We have family, friends, classmates, coworkers, and ourselves who, sometimes, are ruthless when we mess up. They get upset, yell, become bitter and unforgiving. And we do this to others—sometimes one wrong word or one wrong behavior, a forgotten commitment or wrong opinion, and we decided that person isn't worth talking to, and we refuse to spend time with them or talk to them.

But God is not Santa Claus. He is not keeping a naughty and nice list. He is not marking down and checking off when you do something good or when you do something bad. He does not keep a check list. He is not waiting for you mess up for the thousandth time, and then he will strike you down. Those are false ideas about God. The genius of God is that he knows that humans are not transformed by guilt. Their behavior may change, but they, as humans, don't change. They aren't made better by guilt. No, the genius of God is that he knows that humans are transformed by forgiveness. So instead of meeting sin or bad behavior with punishment, he meets it with grace. This is the way that addicts are changed. You know this if you have a family member who has overcome a substance addiction: the harder you come down on them, the worst it gets. What we need as humans is not a tight leash, but a forgiving voice. A father who runs to meet us when we return with our heads hung low in shame. What we need is a God who does not threaten us but forgives us.

God is not mad at you. God does not see you as guilty. Jesus Christ took care of the guilt. All that is left is to receive his forgiveness and love him because of it.

You are forgiven.

Going Deeper

1. Identify some of the negative emotions you have about yourself. What are these thoughts about? Your appearance? Your intelligence? Your relationships?
2. How do these thoughts make you feel? Do you want comfort? Do you get angry? Why do you think you respond this way?
3. The next time you have these thoughts don't follow them down the rabbit hole. Instead, confess your sins to God, be honest, be raw, don't use unnecessary church-y or positive language—tell God exactly how you feel.
4. Memorize this phrase: "In the mercy of almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for you, and for his sake God forgives you all your sins. To those who believe in Jesus Christ he gives the power to become the children of God and bestows on them the Holy Spirit."
5. As you go about your business this week, every time you feel anxious, guilty, depressed, or have unhealthy thought spirals, confess your sins to God honestly, and say the Absolution to yourself. You are forgiven.
6. Is there someone who has wronged you that you haven't forgiven? Find them and forgive them, and get over your bitterness and anger.