

reSTART: 5. Jesus
John 1:26-29; Colossians 2:13-14
October 8, 2017
Pastor Steve Richards

What can wash away my sin?

That's an answer we all are seeking at some point in our lives. You may not have used those exact words, but that's been the question. This is week five in a series in which we are asking where and how would faith begin if we started now or considered restarting now. In childhood, we formed some idea of faith where good things happen to good people. God takes care of good people. Jesus loves me this I know..., but then things happen like last week in Las Vegas and suddenly our childhood faith doesn't work. We were taught to pray to God and ask for forgiveness for sins. We prayed the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses..." but we didn't really know what trespasses are. We heard about sin and knew that was when I lied to mom or went into my sister's room. But when we became adults, the sins got bigger and more consequential and there was guilt and shame associated with what we did and it got to a point where we wished we could do life over again. And, we'd rather not talk about it. It was a long time ago – those things that happened in college or my first marriage and I try not to remember. It hurts too much. Too much shame and guilt. There was that weekend or that thing that happened at work or that money thing I've not told anyone about – even my wife/husband doesn't know. The guilt and shame – we just can't shake it. Can anything wash it away?

It's like this stain that I thought was removed. I sent it off to the cleaners and when it came back, it was gone. But months later or years later, I put on that shirt and somehow, somehow that stain I thought we removed – I can see it. You might not see it, but I can see it. That stuff I thought was over, it came back to the surface when I least expected it. Some try to drink it away, medicate it away or turn to some other behavior, just to cover it up or escape what they feel inside. Some work harder or get into another relationship, but it's still there. Is there something that could WASH it away so I don't think about it or if I remember, I can be okay with it. Isn't it interesting how some things we forget and some things we never forget. Why can't I forget those things I want to forget?

There are mistakes we've made that we can laugh about, but then there are other things that will never be funny. As we saw a few weeks ago, there are mistakes and then there are things that are deeper – we can't erase them. The stain just won't go away. I should have been a better parent, a better husband/wife, a better person. I've used this image before (back pack) – and we carry this stuff around. What can wash my sin away?

The issue is forgiveness. Is there a way to forgive myself so that once I forgive myself, it's over and gone? And if it ever comes to the surface again or I go to that place or see that person or end up at that website, I can say, "I'm done with that!" Forgiveness – it's not so simple. I didn't just go into my sister's room. I went in someone else's room and I saw something and took it. Or, I did something and I'm afraid my family will find out and it would destroy everything.

What can wash my sin away? We may not use these words, but it's our struggle. Every religion, every religious system offers a solution – and maybe you've tried their solutions. Maybe it even worked for a while but the stain came back. Every religion offers a solution, but there was only one person in history who stepped forward to say, "I am the solution."

The Bible describes a man named John who lived in the first century and went into the wilderness. He gave up all vestiges of comfort. He ate locusts and wild honey, wore course

clothing made of camel hair. And, he called people to repentance. In the Jewish tradition there were ceremonial washings where people would symbolically wash themselves before coming to God, but John was not telling people to go cleanse themselves, he was calling them into the Jordan River where he baptized them. And people were drawn to John – crowd of people came out of the cities to be baptized by John. Could he be the long awaited Messiah? John, is that who you are? **“I baptize with water,” John replied, “but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”** You think I’m something, just wait until you see who is coming. And the next day, John looks up and sees Jesus coming to be baptized and John says: **Look, the Lamb of God...**

For 1500 years, the people had been sacrificing lambs to atone for their sins. When someone sinned – it was a sin against God, and something must die. You sin against God and there’s a price to be paid. You deserved to die, but instead of taking their own lives, they believed God would accept a lamb. What John is saying is that God has sent a lamb: **Look, the Lamb of God,** What does the Lamb of God do? **who takes away** that is, carries away **the sins of the world.** Whose sins? Jewish, Roman, Gentile, American, your sin, my sin. When John said this, nobody understood what he meant. That’s not a lamb. That’s a man. That’s Jesus.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus would leave clues. In everything he said and in everything he did, he was pointing beyond himself. They were more than good stories. More than amazing acts of healing. There was more to it. It’s what John said. Then, one night, he gathered with the twelve in what would be their final Passover meal together. Last week we learned Passover was the annual celebration of the night before the Hebrews were set free from slavery in Egypt. That night lambs were slaughtered and the blood of the lamb was wiped around the doors to their homes and that night the angel of death passed over. And the next morning they were free. So every year the Passover meal would celebrate that moment when they were delivered and set free. As Jesus and his disciples came to the end of their Passover meal, Jesus did something that would change the whole meaning of this meal. He said, instead of thinking of lambs, think of me. For 1500 years, this meal had been about that night in Egypt, but now Jesus was saying this meal is about me. I am the lamb. This bread – it is my body broken for you. This wine – it is my blood poured out for you. I am making a brand new covenant for all humanity. And they didn’t really understand. How could they understand? But that night Jesus was arrested – and they all ran away. They all lost faith. Jesus was beaten, bleeding, nailed to a cross – the lamb that was slain.

What can wash my sin away? You can’t. You tried. Maybe it went away for a while or you found ways to distract yourself or to do something to try to feel better, but it keeps coming back. The stain is still there. Is there anything that can wash it away? Nothing can – only a person who picked up and carried away the sins of the whole world.

Twenty years later, the apostle Paul, a man who hated Christians and did everything he could to stop the movement until one day he met the risen Jesus. Paul wrote a letter to a church in Colossea describing what John predicted and Jesus announced and he himself had experienced. **He forgave us all our sins.** Which ones? All. **having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us** Your sin created a debt which is the reason it won’t go away. The debt is real, whatever you’ve done – you don’t owe you, you owe the one who made you, who gave you life. When our youngest daughter chose the college she wanted to attend, we got the financial aid package in the mail and we said we can’t afford that school. But she was insistent. So she took out loans to cover what we would not pay. Then she wanted to go to cosmetology school and there was no financial aid for that. So she took out more loans. But if any of you have been through this process, the schools don’t

allow a young adult to take out tens of thousands of dollars in loans all by themselves. So each time, there was a loan – I would co-sign. I would say, are you sure this is what you want to do. And she said, I'm sure. But in the years since she finished school, she has had no way of making payments on the loans – she's hardly had any income. She is the definition of a starving artist. So at first the loan payments were deferred, but the interest only increases so I began making minimal payments so the loans would not be in default. For 8 years, that's how it has gone. She's had this enormous debt she could not pay. Two weeks ago, she came home and I handed her an envelope from her alma mater. It was the bill for all the loans and she looked at the amount and sighed and just gave it back to me. And I said, look at the last column – paid in full. And she said, I don't understand. When my dad died in May he had a life insurance policy in which I was the beneficiary and we decided to use that money to set you free. All your debts have been paid. Did she ask for that? Did she deserve that? It was a gift. Hear again what Paul was saying: **He forgave our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.** (Colossians 2:13-14) Paul, what can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. The debt – paid in full. It's been canceled. You don't forgive you. You have already been forgiven. You can spend the rest of your life trying to wash it away, but Jesus said: "I am the solution to a problem you cannot fix. I am the lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world." Years ago, I spoke with someone at the end of his life who still carried something that Jesus had already carried away. But he held on to the memory, the guilt, the shame. I said you're already free if you will accept the gift. Just trust the giver of the gift. But he would not let it go.

You've got to decide for yourself. All Jesus is asking is will you trust me? Will you take the gift? The God who gave you life, does not condemn you but loves you unconditionally and he has cancelled your sin, paid the debt in full and set you free. Just accept the gift.

In Ron Lee Davis' book, *A Forgiving God in an Unforgiving World*, he tells the story of a priest in the Philippines, a much-loved man of God, but he carried a secret burden of a long past sin committed once, many years before, while he was in seminary. No one else knew of this sin. He had repented but he still carried the weight of what he had done and felt no peace, no sense of God's forgiveness. There was a woman in his parish who claimed to have visions in which she spoke with Christ. The priest, however, was skeptical of her claims, so he decided to test her. "You say you actually speak with Christ. The next time you have one of your visions, ask Him what sin I committed while I was in seminary." The priest saw the woman a few days later and asked, "Did Christ visit you in your dream?" "Yes," she replied. "And did you ask Him what sin I committed?" Yes, I asked Him. And what did he say? He said, "I don't remember."

You have already been forgiven. Accept the gift. The lamb of God has taken away the sin of the world. And today, if you are tired of carrying the guilt and shame, tired of trying to earn your way out, tired of it all, then I invite you to pray with me.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of October 8, 2017

Weekly Prayer: Gracious God, we are students in search of a Teacher. We are disciples longing for the Master. We are sinners in need of a Savior. We are travelers seeking the Christ. We come as we are – proud, broken, weary, or self-serving – asking for your grace, forgiveness, and love. May the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

Monday, October 9

Scripture: 1 Kings 8:22-30

Solomon stood before the LORD's altar in front of the entire Israelite assembly and, spreading out his hands toward the sky, he said: LORD God of Israel, there's no god like you in heaven above or on earth below. You keep the covenant and show loyalty to your servants who walk before you with all their heart. This is the covenant you kept with your servant David, my father, which you promised him. Today, you have fulfilled what you promised. So now, LORD, Israel's God, keep what you promised my father David, your servant, when you said to him, "You will never fail to have a successor sitting on Israel's throne as long as your descendants carefully walk before me just as you walked before me." So now, God of Israel, may your promise to your servant David, my father, come true. But how could God possibly live on earth? If heaven, even the highest heaven, can't contain you, how can this temple that I've built contain you? LORD my God, listen to your servant's prayer and request, and hear the cry and prayer that your servant prays to you today. Constantly watch over this temple, the place about which you said, "My name will be there," and listen to the prayer that your servant is praying toward this place. Listen to the request of your servant and your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Listen from your heavenly dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive!

Observation: King Solomon offered this prayer, dedicating the Temple in Jerusalem. He knew that he and the people would come to the Temple to seek God's mercy. Through their sacrifices and prayers, God's Old Testament people counted on God's grace, and trusted in God's forgiveness. "And when you hear," Solomon asked God humbly, "forgive."

Application: What if Solomon had prayed the kind of prayer we are tempted to pray (and sometimes do): "Lord, hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear...bless us, reward us for being your people, and give us great success." What different spirit would such a prayer show? Which prayer is more often your prayer?

Prayer: Merciful God, give me a humble heart so that when I look at my life I can see what you see and not what I want you to see. I know I am not all that I could be. Grant me the forgiveness that I need. Amen.

Tuesday, October 10

Scripture: Psalm 130:1-8

I cry out to you from the depths, LORD—my Lord, listen to my voice! Let your ears pay close attention to my request for mercy! If you kept track of sins, LORD—my Lord, who would stand a chance? But forgiveness is with you—that's why you are honored. I hope, LORD. My whole being hopes, and I wait for God's promise. My whole being waits for my Lord—more than the night watch waits for morning; yes, more than the night watch waits for morning! Israel, wait for the LORD! Because faithful love is with the LORD; because great redemption is with our God! He is the one who will redeem Israel from all its sin.

Observation: "Out of the depths I cry." This psalmist knew how awful it is to sink deeper and deeper in despair. For emphasis, the psalm repeats the image of watchmen waiting in the darkness for the first gleam of morning light, saying "That's how eagerly I wait for God's mercy." And God's love is unfailing—God will redeem from all sins.

Application: Verse 3 says, "If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?" Doesn't God keep a record of sins? Compare Psalm 103:10, 12: "He does not treat us as our

sins deserve....as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." What do these poetic images tell you about God's passion to forgive?

Prayer: God, I give thanks for your loving kindness and how you are so generous in mercy. Give me a longing for the freedom that you offer when I accept the forgiveness you have for me. Amen.

Wednesday, October 11

Scripture: Luke 7:36-50

One of the Pharisees invited Jesus to eat with him. After he entered the Pharisee's home, he took his place at the table. Meanwhile, a woman from the city, a sinner, discovered that Jesus was dining in the Pharisee's house. She brought perfumed oil in a vase made of alabaster. Standing behind him at his feet and crying, she began to wet his feet with her tears. She wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and poured the oil on them. When the Pharisee who had invited Jesus saw what was happening, he said to himself, If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. He would know that she is a sinner. Jesus replied, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher, speak," he said. "A certain lender had two debtors. One owed enough money to pay five hundred people for a day's work. The other owed enough money for fifty. When they couldn't pay, the lender forgave the debts of them both. Which of them will love him more?" Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the largest debt canceled." Jesus said, "You have judged correctly." Jesus turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? When I entered your home, you didn't give me water for my feet, but she wet my feet with tears and wiped them with her hair. You didn't greet me with a kiss, but she hasn't stopped kissing my feet since I came in. You didn't anoint my head with oil, but she has poured perfumed oil on my feet. This is why I tell you that her many sins have been forgiven; so she has shown great love. The one who is forgiven little loves little." Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." The other table guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this person that even forgives sins?" Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

Observation: Jesus was famous (and some might say, infamous) for forgiving. There were people who wanted the woman in this story to forever live under a cloud of shame – never to be forgiven. Jesus' host Simon felt that way about the woman in this story. But not Jesus. "Your sins are forgiven," he repeated.

Application: Freedom from her guilt before God also gave this woman freedom from feelings of shame before others. If not, she would not have been able to act out her gratitude in such a bold act of love to Jesus. When have you been "ashamed to show your face"? How can opening your life to God's love and forgiveness set you free to live more fully?

Prayer: Lord, I am wonderfully made in your image. You want me to live in such a way that nothing will be a barrier to the fullness of your love. Help me to be free of guilt and shame and completely accepting of your unconditional love. Amen.

Thursday, October 12

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 7:8-11

Even though my letter hurt you, I don't regret it. Well—I did regret it just a bit because I see that that letter made you sad, though only for a short time. Now I'm glad—not because you were sad but because you were made sad enough to change your hearts and lives. You felt godly

sadness so that no one was harmed by us in any way. Godly sadness produces a changed heart and life that leads to salvation and leaves no regrets, but sorrow under the influence of the world produces death. Look at what this very experience of godly sadness has produced in you: such enthusiasm, what a desire to clear yourselves of blame, such indignation, what fear, what purpose, such concern, what justice! In everything you have shown yourselves to be innocent in the matter.

Observation: “Godly sorrow,” “worldly sorrow”—what’s the difference? Godly sorrow is constructive. It involves an experience of God’s grace, resulting in repentance. It brings about change. Worldly sorrow is never resolved. It is guilt feelings. It is self-centered over the consequences of sin.

Application: What positive results does Paul name as coming from “godly sorrow”? In what ways do those steps lead toward a positive outcome and genuine change for the better? When have you seen this process operate in your life or the life of someone close to you? Worldly sorrow means punishing ourselves by hanging onto feelings of guilt and shame. How can these feelings keep us from taking steps toward healing? When is the spiritual discipline of counseling needed to help us recognize and live beyond “worldly sorrow”? In what ways is Paul right in saying that this kind of sorrow brings death?

Prayer: God, the scriptures proclaim that if you set me free, then I am free indeed. Help me to hear your powerful declaration in such a way that the voices of “sorrow” will be silent. Amen.

Friday, October 13

Scripture: 1 John 1:5-2:2

This is the message that we have heard from him and announce to you: "God is light and there is no darkness in him at all." If we claim, "We have fellowship with him," and live in the darkness, we are lying and do not act truthfully. But if we live in the light in the same way as he is in the light, we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from every sin. If we claim, "We don't have any sin," we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from everything we've done wrong. If we claim, "We have never sinned," we make him a liar and his word is not in us.

My little children, I'm writing these things to you so that you don't sin. But if you do sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one. He is God's way of dealing with our sins, not only ours but the sins of the whole world.

Observation: When we confess our brokenness and sin, John assured us, forgiveness is always there. But sometimes blindness, fear or stubborn pride make us deny that we need mercy. John urged his readers to let God’s grace give them the courage to assess themselves as honestly as possible: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves.”

Application: Many of us say things like, “I can never forgive myself for _____.” C. S. Lewis wrote, “What we call ‘asking God’s forgiveness’ very often really consists in asking God to accept our excuses.” If every problem is someone else’s fault, if we are always sure we did nothing wrong, something may be blinding us. Do you ever miss out on God’s forgiveness because you refuse to admit that you need forgiveness?

Prayer: Lord God, forgive me my trespasses as I forgive those who trespass against me. Help me to count forgiveness as a gift to be remembered and to be shared. Amen.

Saturday, October 14

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:14-21

The love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: one died for the sake of all; therefore, all died. He died for the sake of all so that those who are alive should live not for themselves but for the one who died for them and was raised. So then, from this point on we won't recognize people by human standards. Even though we used to know Christ by human standards, that isn't how we know him now. So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived! All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation. In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people's sins against them. He has trusted us with this message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors who represent Christ. God is negotiating with you through us. We beg you as Christ's representatives, "Be reconciled to God!" God caused the one who didn't know sin to be sin for our sake so that through him we could become the righteousness of God.

Observation: Paul summed up for the church in Corinth the message he believed with all his heart. "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them." The cross, Paul said, made God's eagerness to forgive and accept you, no matter where you've been or what you've done, crystal clear. The question is: can you accept God's gift, and live in the freedom from guilt God offers? Do it, Paul implored: "Be reconciled to God."

Application: In what parts of your life are you still struggling with guilt, and seeking a new start? Are you open to getting any help you need in order to move beyond destructive guilt and self-hatred? How will you respond to Paul's plea to "be reconciled to God"?

Prayer: Thank you, God, for forgiving me. Amen.