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Get Out of Jail...Free!

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What is the Bible and why do we read it?

Perhaps we are looking for instruction so that in any situation we can answer the question “What would Jesus do?”

Others read it to take in the sweep of human history over 2,000 years, from Old Testament times through the century following the birth of Christ, as a record of how God was working in the world in different ways at different times.

But the Bible is not just a book. It is the inspired Word of God. As such, it is living thing—alive and powerful, as Hebrews 4 tells us, sharper than a two-edged sword. It reaches into our lives, divides joints from marrow, and challenges us, the people of God, in the most profound ways. And, if we let it, it has the power to transform us, to literally change our lives.

It’s useful to be able to quote scripture and verse. Most of you probably remember at least a few of the passages you had to memorize during confirmation. Think of your favorite one right now. [PAUSE] You’ve probably kept this verse close at hand, and it has spoken to you in different ways throughout your life.

But the larger question in any reading from the Bible is: What is the context, what is the larger issue, and how do we, the readers, respond?

I invite you to look in your bulletin at today’s Gospel reading from Luke. Imagine that you are watching a movie of it, slowly, perhaps even frame by frame. What do you see?

We seem to still be in the town of Nain, where in last week's reading Jesus brought the widow's son back to life. A Pharisee, a Jewish religious leader, is hosting a meal. Knowing Jesus is someone of significance, he's invited Jesus to dinner along with other guests. Perhaps the meal is even in Jesus' honor.

It's a rather formal occasion, where customs and rituals are followed. Jesus enters and reclines at the table, the traditional posture for meals at the time. His body is leaning one way, his feet are extended the other—perhaps in the direction of the open door.

Suddenly something happens that undoubtedly shocks the Pharisee and his guests. A woman enters who is “known in the city a sinner.” This probably means she's a prostitute. But not only that—she goes immediately to Jesus' feet, within easy reach, and tends to them in the most intimate way. Either she's oblivious to the formal occasion into which she intrudes, or she doesn't care. Her bold actions show that she knows Jesus as her Lord and Savior.

Imagine the Pharisee's outrage. Luke doesn't share with us any choice words that he might have said. But because Jesus doesn't send her away, Simon the Pharisee questions everything he thought he knew about Jesus. If Jesus *were* really a prophet, Simon thinks, he'd have known the woman to be a sinner and wouldn't have allowed such a display of intimacy.

As a prostitute, the woman is an outcast in Jewish society, poor, shunned, and alone. So of course Jesus allows her to stay, because, as we remember from Luke 4, Jesus has “been anointed to bring good news to the poor.”

But back to the Pharisee: Jesus, of course, knows exactly what Simon is thinking. He knows Simon would rather be rid of this woman and get back to his dinner party.

So Jesus decides to turn this into a teaching moment for the Pharisee. First he makes clear with his story about the two debtors that, the more we have sinned, the more grateful we are that God forgives us. Then Jesus gestures toward the woman. Her sins, he tells the Pharisee, have been forgiven because of her great humility and love. As one forgiven of such a great burden of sin, she is overwhelmed with gratitude.

Forgiveness opens the floodgates of love. But forgiveness is often very difficult for us, particularly when we've been badly hurt.

Think of a time when you found forgiveness difficult. [PAUSE] Or maybe you're still in that place.

Now, think about the pain you felt, or still feel, as a result of that. Locate that pain deep in your heart. How would you depict it? Perhaps as a little drawing of a heart with a jagged crack down the middle. What is its condition? Draw some crossbars over it. This is your heart in jail. It is captive to the pain that imprisons it. If you try to live in this condition, chances are good that you are going around wounding other people's hearts, too.

How does the heart break free of its prison? The first step is to reach down and bring the pain to the surface, into the daylight. Share this pain with people you trust and who will allow you to talk, and who won't interrupt with advice. In so doing, you'll find over time that pain begins to dissipate as you become able to see it objectively. At some point the crossbars dissolve, the jagged crack mends, and the heart is able once again to receive God's love, which as we know from Romans 5 is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. You regain your awareness of how much God loves you, no matter who you are or how great your transgressions have been.

Then comes the breakthrough: As you experience yourself as beloved by God, you are able to forgive yourself. God loves and forgives you, no matter what, so how could you NOT forgive yourself? And then you are able to extend this forgiveness to others, as well.

Love is our “Get Out of Jail” card, and yes, it is free! Our lives in Christ begin and end with God’s love. In all the universe, there is no stronger force.

Let’s return to the end of our little movie about the woman and the Pharisee. Now we can understand why Jesus says the woman’s “sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love.” And we also grasp the meaning of Jesus’ final words to the Pharisee: “But the one who is forgiven little, loves little.”

Notice, though, that the story is left open-ended. After Jesus pronounces the woman forgiven and saved, we don’t know what lies ahead for her. Is she received back into the community as one restored to good standing? Or does she remain an outcast?

This is where we enter as active participants. *We*, the members and friends of Atonement Lutheran Church, are that community. Do we accept a sinful person who repents as one forgiven, or do we continue to judge and condemn? Do we respond to radical acts of love out of fear, toeing the line of convention like the Pharisee? Or do we respond as those whose sins are forgiven and who are free to love, and to live?

This is good news for God’s people.

Amen.