

Preached by Carl Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, Virginia
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Scripture: Genesis 45: 1-15
Romans 11: 1-2; 29-32

THE ESSENTIALS THAT TIE US TOGETHER

What must we do to obtain mercy? What must we say to obtain mercy? Our first thought may be simply, "Father, forgive me." But before we ask for that forgiveness—this is going to sound strange—we have to be disobedient.

So, in order to obtain mercy, we must first disobey. It's a strange and wonderful truth of existence in Christ. God can only show mercy to those who need to be forgiven for something. That doesn't sound so difficult, does it? This is an old, old story, but: a prayer is made by a saintly woman: "Oh God, I thank you that I have had no evil thoughts about anyone today. I have not wanted anything that wasn't mine. I have not thought of anything since I awoke but You. But since I just woke up, Lord, I'm going to need help for the rest of the day."

Sin, Augustine said, is inevitable. And yet, even in what we intend for evil, either consciously or not, if we are willing to admit our disobedience, we can receive mercy.

What is it about mercy that is so important to our spiritual growth? What is it about forgiveness that allows us the power to forgive others? And how can we understand how all of this works? God has established a relationship with us that works in and beyond our disobedience. Salvation for us comes through this covenant. And salvation for others comes, indeed, through us, by God's leading.

I was really hoping one of our resident architects would be here today, because I wanted to put a disclaimer on what I'm about to say to you. You know that Fred Kuntz has worked diligently; he loves this church. He is committed to providing us with the best plan for buildings and for our physical plant—for our campus here, if you will. And I was going to tell him that even with his best design, what we have now and what we will have in the future is really nothing more than a shoe box. No matter how beautiful, no matter how skillfully designed, whatever we do as a congregation in the next few years as we attempt to put new buildings on this property and to take care of buildings that have deteriorated, it is just going to be a box. The shape may be different. But the size, we've said, will be the same.

So what is important about a shoe box? Well, maybe it's what we find inside. It's not the shoe, but our purpose. Thessalonians says "For this purpose you were called to proclaim the good news so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm, hold fast to the traditions you were taught either by word of mouth or letter."

Our purpose is to share the good news—to be evangelists, to share the good news in ways that may startle others. For we are not those who go out and proselytize; yet we

are those who go out and love. It was proclaiming the good news to establish a relationship with Todee. It was proclaiming the good news this last Friday when before 5:30 AM, members of this congregation went down to Miriam's Kitchen. It is proclaiming the good news each time we promise parents that we will live in such a way that their children and their children's children will understand the love of Christ. For we are God's servants. Working together, we are God's field. We are God's building.

A great deal is made of the challenges we face as a congregation, not only to fill this sanctuary and to establish a firm footing here on this corner of Franconia and Jane Way. But sometimes a great deal is made about what we really are doing.

Our call to worship was taken from Psalm 133. "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity." We don't grasp the full meaning of that psalm. It was a psalm written to reunite northern and southern branches of Judaism. It was a psalm written to reunite families that had fallen out of love with one another. It was a psalm written to heal the brokenness of a nation as the people were disobedient, even as we are. And this unity, this decision to be and create the box that shares the good news with others—it is like precious oil. I always love it when I read these passages about beards. It seems to be an essential part of scripture—oil running down upon the beard and over the collar of the robe, dew from Mt. Hermon in sufficient quantities, sufficient blessing, to go down and anoint all of thine.

God has decided to love us. And we struggle to understand how our being disobedient is a rejection of that love. In fact, we struggle to admit how reluctant we are to be disobedient, for we see ourselves as trying our best. We see ourselves as people who know that we love this congregation and Christ in this congregation and there is nothing we wouldn't do for one another – nothing! If only one of us would ask, the rest would respond.

Have you ever thought that not asking for the support of your congregation in prayer and in person might be our greatest temptation to be disobedient? The *not* asking? God has decided to love us and we wonder what to do with that love—how to live it, how to share it, how to let others see it in us. And so God has shown us that that love means new life—new beginnings. Beginnings that started with Christ's resurrection on the cross, new healing, new shoe boxes, if you will, from which we, indeed, can spread the good news of Jesus Christ alive in our midst.

Now, if Christ isn't resurrected for you—if the joy of his coming out of the grave and meeting you eye to eye, and toe to toe, and face to face and putting his arms around you and loving you into newness. If that is not genuine or real any longer for you, what next? It's kneel and say, "I've been disobedient. I haven't asked for enough from you. Show me your mercy."

God has decided to love us. That is the greatest news in all the world. Amen.