

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“On the Job Training: Practicing Accountability”
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Psalm 30:1-5, John 21:15-19

I was probably about 8 or 9 years old and I was going to the medical center with my mother and a couple of my brothers. We were driving our 1962 Ford station wagon. For those of you who are too young to have known such a vehicle it was one of those cars that you docked rather than parked. It was one huge piece of steel. We were sitting in the left turn lane waiting to go when suddenly there was this loud crash and my brothers and I were knocked forward. I quickly looked behind us and there was a little MG that had rear ended us at a relatively high speed. The front end of his car was crushed and water was rushing out all over the street. My mother exited the car and all I could hear was the man screaming at my mother...not a good thing to do. Years later I asked my mom about it she said that the man had claimed that the accident was her fault; that her brake lights had gone off for an instant and so he assumed that she was going...even though the light was clearly red and there was traffic moving the other direction. As I have reflected back on that moment it is one of those powerful reminders that none of us like to hold ourselves accountable for many of the dumb things we do. They are always someone else's fault.

Taking responsibility for our own actions; holding ourselves accountable is one of the most difficult things for human beings to do. When something bad happens our usual first course of action is to find someone else to blame. When my mother would ask if my little brothers were crying because I had been picking on them, my first response was, “No, must have been someone else.” Or, “But they started it.” Regardless it was never going to be my fault. And in a sense this is where we find ourselves with Peter. Peter was one of those guys who was never really willing to hold himself accountable for his actions. In the upper room at the last supper, Peter made the declaration that he would never abandon Jesus; that not even death itself could separate them. Yet in the end, not only did Peter not stick with Jesus but he denied him three times. Peter pretended that he had never known Jesus. And now that Jesus was resurrected Peter acted as if everything was fine...that maybe Jesus had forgotten about his betrayal. Yet Jesus hadn't and forces Peter to be accountable for his choices.

This is what is taking place in our morning's story where Jesus questions Peter three different times with the words, Do you love me? Each time Jesus asks the question it forces Peter to answer for the three times that he denied Jesus. The first two answers that Peter offers are perfunctory...sort of, “Sure Jesus we all know how much I love you. Can't you see that? How can you doubt my sincerity?” Notice how he makes no effort to explain or even admit what he had done. Finally on the third time Peter is hurt and replies, “OK Jesus you know everything. Yes I love you.” That moment was Peter's admission that he had fallen short of his own desire to follow Jesus. That he did not love Jesus as much as he said he did. In a sense he is finally holding himself accountable for the choices that he made when Jesus was being interrogated. It is at this point though that many people become a little bit irritated with Jesus. After all hadn't Jesus forgiven Peter? Isn't that what Jesus does? And if so why should Jesus force Peter

to take responsibility for his action; to make Peter accountable? Isn't that just pouring salt on an open wound?

The answers are yes Jesus had forgiven him. In the passages leading up to this one we see Jesus essentially forgiving not only Peter but all of the disciples. What we see here however is that Jesus understands something important about forgiveness and that is that forgiveness is only effective when the one being forgiven holds themselves accountable for that for which they are being forgiven. In a sense, forgiveness is like a key that opens a locked door; a door behind which someone is trapped in whatever sin diminishes themselves and those around them; hate, anger, abuse...or you choose one that you carry. Those sins are the baggage that they have with them in that locked room. Unless that person holds themselves accountable for what they have done, acknowledging what is in the baggage, even if they were to walk through the door unlocked by forgiveness, they would find themselves trapped in another slightly different room but with the same baggage. They would take their sins with them. Nothing would change. They would still be trapped, locked away by sin. It is only when we open our baggage, acknowledge that we packed it, and then offer those sins to God to be forgiven, that they can be left behind and our baggage become lighter. This is why Jesus held Peter accountable. Jesus had important things for Peter to do and Peter needed to lighten in his load in order to do them.

This combination of forgiveness and accountability is one of the great themes of scripture. It is at the heart of the scriptures from the beginning to the end. God holds Adam and Eve accountable. God wants Cain to hold himself accountable for the murder of his brother Abel. The people in the wilderness are taught about holding themselves accountable as they move toward the Land of Promise. The prophets' main message is that if God's people want to live into the fullness of life that God offers them then they need to hold themselves accountable for how they treat the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger. In other words, God's forgiveness is always there as a key to unlock whatever doors bind us...but in order to be free we have to deal with the baggage...we have to hold ourselves accountable and move forward. Jesus came into the world to forgive sins; to set people free. Jesus came to help all of humanity discover the joy of being fully human; of loving God and neighbor. But Jesus can only go so far. Jesus can love us, forgive us, change the orientation of our hearts, but ultimately we are the ones who have to step up to the plate and choose to be different; choose to do something with what he has done for us.

Last week I told the story of Shaka, a young man who grew up here in Detroit and through a traumatic event turned to a life of crime on the streets. That life eventually led him to murder someone. He was convicted and sent to prison for 20 years. I also told you about the power of forgiveness, that one of the relatives of his victim forgave him for his crime and that forgiveness was a key that began to unlock the doors of his life. But as he tells his story, that was only a beginning. His next step was to hold himself accountable for his crime; that it was his choice to get to the gun and to pull the trigger. He said this lesson was taught to him by the "lifers", those who would never see the outside of a prison again. But they had learned this great truth and shared it with him. Forgiveness unlocked the door and accountability allowed him to leave the baggage of blaming others behind. Shaka chose to open his bags and to begin to change his life...which he did and is now changed and works very actively to share the power of his transformation with others, especially those who may be vulnerable to making mistakes like he made.

You and I are the beneficiaries of God's gracious love. God in Jesus Christ forgives all of our sins without us having to do anything. Yet if we desire to be new people; changed people, then we need to hold ourselves accountable. We need to examine our baggage, acknowledge that we packed it, and then offer its contents to God, that we might leave them behind. My challenge to you then this morning is this, to ask yourselves how am I holding myself accountable for my sins, that I might leave them behind and become the new person God would have me to be?