

Calvary United Methodist Church
October 6, 2019

THE MARVELOUS AND REMARKABLE FORGIVENESS OF GOD

Rev. Dr. Stephen Gallaher

Children's Message:

I'd like to invite my young friends to come and join me up front here, if you would be willing to do that. Come on over, have a seat on the floor. A couple of things I want to share with you. Oh, you guys are going up there. Okay, alright. That's cool, that works.

So, well, my name is Stephen and it's an absolute joy to be with everybody here today. We had a blast in the first service and looking forward to our time together in this service.

Now, you might notice that I brought my backpack and I do have a couple of things in the backpack and I want to show you some of the things I have in my backpack. So this is going to be familiar to you immediately when I pull it out. So, what do I have? (A pumpkin.) That's exactly right. Doesn't that look cool? It is a really nice rounded pumpkin and on the smaller side... (Child speaks.) What? It's a real one, feel it. It is absolutely real, do you agree. (Wow!) Yeah, you want to feel it too. Do you agree that it is real? It is definitely real. (You could make a jack o'lantern out of it.) I could, but it is a little small to carve. But, you know, we could marker it and things like that. So, I've got another one. Look at this one. It's a different kind of pumpkin. (It's a white pumpkin.) Yeah, it's a white pumpkin, but it's equally real, it's not fake. And I'm going to put that one right here too, ok? So then I have another one. This is a lot different but this is a pumpkin. It's a little guy. And this, like these are some of my favorites. Isn't that cool? What do you notice about these pumpkins? (They are all pumpkins.) They are all different, kind of like us, huh? (One looks like macaroni and cheese.) Now you are making people hungry. Macaroni and cheese.

Okay, what else do you notice about the pumpkins. (Child speaks.) Oh, from top to bottom, from the largest to the smallest, but, yeah, I guess that's true. I didn't necessarily do that intentionally, but that is an excellent observation, very right. Yes? (Child speaks.) They are. That's an excellent point. Yes. (Child speaks.) Ah, very interesting. Wow we have some really deep insights here. This is really good. Yes. (Child speaks.) Yes, powerful, they are all different just like we are. Are they still all pumpkins? Well, they are all pumpkins. Yes. (Their colors are different: that one is orange, that one is white, that one is small and this one is candy corn colors.) That's exactly right. This one has a little green in it, did you notice that?

Put the point is true. These are all different, they are all pumpkins, just like us. And in fact I've got a book that tells me how to raise them. Now, my brothers and I, we run the family farm and one of the things that we do on a family farm is we raise pumpkins and these are some of the pumpkins that I raised this year and pulled them out and every now and then I will refer to this book to help me understand how to grow my pumpkins the best they can possibly

be.

Well, I also have a book here that helps understand how we are to be and I love reading this book and we call this the Bible. This helps me to grow, to understand God and how I am to live. So these pumpkins are really really different pumpkins, but they are all really cool; different shapes, different sizes, different colors, different stems. They are completely different, but they are all pumpkins and they are all of great value. And so are we. Great value in the sight of God. We really are.

Okay, I want to us to pray together and what I would like for us to do is bow our heads and close our eyes so we are not looking around at lights or anything like that. We are just going to talk to God and we call that prayer. Okay, let's pray:

Lord God, thank you very much for our day. Thank you for all the kids that are a part of this faith community. Thank you for our folks and those that feed us and clothe us, make sure we have really nice places to sleep and to stay and to grow up. And we thank you for all these things, Lord. We thank you, Father, for your Son Jesus who loves and helps us understand just how valuable every one of us is. We pray this with great joy in Jesus' name. And we kids all agree in saying...how do we close a prayer? And we all agree saying...Amen. Alright, fantastic. Or Ahmen. Thank you. You can go back to your folks.

Message:

Luke 5:17-26

A moment of personal privilege, first of all, I told my Aunt Bonnie, I said: I'm so excited because I get to come to your church to preach. I've preached in nearly half of the churches in this conference but I've never preached before here at Calvary and what an absolute joy to be with her and her husband Ray and my daughter Kate and her husband Brian. Kate is the Administrative Assistant in the district office of the United Methodist Church for Harrisburg. In fact, she's the one that set this all up when Pastor Jeff called and asked if they have a list of clergy that might be available to speak and she said, "Well, no we don't have a list, but my dad can do it." You know, like, who is your dad? I mean is he a guy down on the corner of the street, who is your dad? When she told him who her dad was, I've known Jeff for forty years in ministry and this worked out really well.

So, we do pray for his work and all the mission team work down in New Mexico, that that goes really well for them and what a joy to see Marti Derr today. We teach together on the Messiah College campus. That is an absolute joy, so, I am personally grateful to have the privilege of sharing with you today.

I am going to be reading from Luke 5:17-26. This is an incredible narrative, a story that unfolds in the life of Jesus and there are a lot of different ways to look at this story and I just want to focus on one particular element of it and you'll understand quickly what I am focusing on as I move into a message this morning. So, you may have a Bible with you to follow

along or else obviously it is on the screen. And by the way with the screen work, he's walking out but I want to thank Steve and all the crew, these guys back there that do all the behind the scenes work. Your hospitality to me here at the beginning of the day was awesome, so thank you very very much. I appreciate it. This is the Word of the Lord. (Luke 5:17-26.

Would it be safe to say and that we would be in total agreement that we have all experienced awkward or embarrassing moments? Would that be a safe statement to make, do you think? We've all experienced them from time to time. One of the great joys I have as serving as Associate Pastor of Preaching and Teaching at the Camp Hill United Methodist Church, which basically means that when the two lead pastors or one of them are taking vacation or just need a Sunday off, I come off the bench as an opportunity to preach and administer the Word of God. And I really look forward to that and I had been scheduled to speak in the traditional service. We offer four services there, but we offer two of them concurrently, so you have a traditional service and a contemporary service being offered at the same time two times on a Sunday morning. So, I'm being asked to speak at the traditional service, so therefore the attire is a bit different than what I would wear if I'm preaching in the more contemporary service. And I'm ready for the service and I look at my watch and I figure I have about two minutes to go before I will proceed and join with the choir for the start of the service, inviting everybody with hearts open to receive from the Lord and at that moment I realized I forgot the announcements that the pastor wanted me to highlight at the beginning of the service. And I realized too that the announcements were in his office on his desk, he told me that's where they would be and I forgot to pick them up. I've got two minutes. I am going to beat it over to the office in a facility adjacent to the church building, grab the announcements, come back and begin the service. I make it to his office, grab the announcements, I come back to the facility and I decide I'm going to take a short cut through the children's wing of the facility. And I'm in the children's hall, rounding the corner of a drinking fountain right on the end of that hallway and I didn't see the puddle in front of the drinking fountain. When I hit that puddle, my feet went out from underneath me and I went down hard. It was painful. But in all honesty, when I went down my first thought wasn't am I hurt, my first thought was who just saw that? And some older, senior member of the congregation was at the end of the hallway, she saw the whole thing and she hollers out, "Oh, Pastor Stephen, are you okay?" And I said, "Yes," as I'm picking myself up off the floor. "Yeah, I'm okay." I realized my pants are soaked and I'm going into the formal traditional service on Sunday morning and I am soaking... "Yeah, I'm okay, I'm alright." And (sniffing) that's not water. Where's the kid that couldn't hold it in front of the drinking fountain. And I hope it was a kid, I'm not sure. But I can't believe it. I've got now seconds to move into the service, lead the worship and my pants are soaked in some kid's pee. And what do you do with it? You can't walk... "Sir, may I borrow your trousers for the service?" You can't do stuff like that. What am I going to do because I don't use a pulpit but I did that day because right behind that big wooden pulpit I positioned myself for the entire service. And I know that the congregation thought it's a bit odd that he has confined himself to the pulpit that day, but honestly I was so embarrassed about the matter that I did because they were going to think maybe I did that. And I just needed to stand here the whole time. Well, I pulled it off...at least I thought I did. And at

the end of the service, where I would normally come down, obviously and extend the benediction, recede and meet the people at the end of service, I simply said, "Beloved, in lieu of meeting you at the conclusion of the service today, I would like to offer the benediction from the pulpit and say to each of you, 'God bless, have an amazing week.'" And I'm really smiling, I'm feeling really good about myself because I think I really did pull this off until one member of the choir, and I don't know why it always seems to erupt out of the choir, one member of the choir hollered out, "Hey, Pastor Stephen. Nice pants." But the acoustics in the facility and the unintended reverb was awesome and everybody now knows why I have stayed behind the pulpit and I don't have much...just, you know... And everybody starts laughing.

Now, what would you do in that situation? What would you choose to do? I chose to laugh along with them because stuff happens like this. I don't know why it seems to happen to me an awful lot, but I work in youth ministry, so hanging around with kids a ton wouldn't surprise you that I would be subject to embarrassing and awkward moments. But that's the human condition. We experience these things.

But I am not embarrassed and I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the power of God and the salvation for those who believe. And all I did was pull Paul from Romans 1:16 where he writes: I am not ashamed. I am not embarrassed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And I am so grateful because I have lived this journey in the presence of people who have not been embarrassed or ashamed of the Gospel.

A lot of people, in fact all of my mentors are now with Jesus. People who invested in my, people who poured into me, people who taught me...when I say taught, I'm just not talking about a verbal proclamation. I'm also talking about a powerful demonstration and the word and action were read in how they lived their lives and I took note. You probably did too. God speaking through people who invested in you just as God invested in me. And these people taught me a whole lot more about life than maybe I've ever communicated to others. They taught me the value of relationships and they illustrated God honoring wholesome relationships.

But at the same time they taught me and demonstrated what happens when there is friction in a relationship and we get it...we all understand it. We know there are times when things just rub raw a little bit. It could be within the framework of a marriage. It could be in the framework of close confidants. Colleagues. Neighbors. Extended family. Immediate family. The question never in a relationship is will I be hurt. The question is always how will I respond to the hurt once it has been inflicted and they will, those hurts, will be inflicted.

I really believe that a lot of times those hurts are unintentional. You know how we shoot off, you know we say things that we wish we could take back but we don't. Or we just say something a little callous. We say it haphazardly and it just offended somebody and we didn't even realize that we did it. Hurts wound and they wound significantly and sometimes it goes

beyond words. Whoever came up with sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me...that's totally false. Who came up with that? They do hurt. But when it goes beyond just words, Beloved, it can be devastating. Devastating to our sense of worth and dignity. Devastating to our relationships. Devastating within the peace of the family fabric.

The last congregation I served full time was in Waymart, Pennsylvania, an incredible place, I spent twelve years in that parish. We loved it. However, starting in that parish, well, it didn't get off to such a good start. I had heard about this parish having a very active youth ministry and the second Sunday I was there I wanted to just check out what they do and how they do it and not to intervene or interfere with anything, I just wanted to see what they were doing and who was involved. So, I attended the Sunday evening youth ministry gathering and well, about ten minutes after it was supposed to start and four kids and four adult leaders showed up. And thank God for four kids and four adult leaders. Thank God for them. Simply a departure from what I had been informed about the 25 or 30 kids that were actively involved, so I just asked the question: Is everybody here tonight that you believe is coming? Of course, the one counselor got me off to the side and said: Were you not informed? Oh, no I was not informed. Informed about what? Well, the rift, the split that we had in youth ministry. No, I didn't hear anything about that. He said: well, it started with two kids in the ministry. Well, I probably should know what happened here. Well, it was two kids that were going out, but the relationship was heading south and the young woman said: I don't want to continue in this relationship anymore and the young man didn't want to let go of the relationship, and so it really began to spiral out of control and as she pushed him further and further away he tried to get closer and closer and closer and then he started doing stupid stuff, thinking that he could rekindle her affections for him if he would do things like trash her locker. What was he thinking? Or he started stalking her thinking, well, that will gain her attention. Well, not in a positive way, would it? Well, she goes home and tells her mom and dad all these things that this young man is doing. And mom and dad are very upset about it. Every mom and dad would be. But he goes home and tells his mom and dad his side of things and how she is being mean and cruel and just not responsive at all and of course his mom and dad are upset. So these two kids are part of the youth ministry, but so are their moms and dads because they are all four counselors. So, just before I begin my new pastorate in Waymart, PA, the two moms in the middle of a youth gathering decide to have it out. They did something that, and I understand it as a parent, they did something scripture warns us not to do. They took up someone else's offense, namely their kids. So now they are steaming mad and they start verbally exchanging their perspective, like how I cleaned that up a little bit. They just exchanged their perspectives with one another, but it got loud and it got heated and this is in the middle of the ministry. And the kids are: what is going on? They have never seen anything like this between two adults in their church. And they are waging war verbally and the one husband things: I've just about had enough, so he walks into the middle of the conversation, he shouldn't have done it. He walks into the middle of the conversation and tells the other woman to shut up. Now, you might think that would calm things down. Well, the other husband heard and saw everything that was going on and he wasn't going to stay out of it so he walked up to the guy who just told his wife to shut up and dropped him right in the middle of

the meeting. Clocked him, dropped him right on the ground. This kid's laughing, the kids there weren't laughing in that moment. Some kids started crying; kids ran out of the building; they had never seen anything like this before.

No, I wasn't informed. I didn't realize that that had happened. Well, the next Sunday, both families came to worship. They both came in separately which was a departure of how they would normally come in because they were friends, and one sat on one side of the congregation and one sat on the other and they all had their allies. It spread quickly, folks. You know how that happens? You know: I'm wounded, I'm offended, so I tell him who tells him who tells her who tells her. And now I have this lovely quartet here all steaming mad at me and they don't know a clue what really happened.

There is a scriptural reference to that. It says: Don't let any bitterness rise up within your soul because it defiles others. It defiles many. Because we share our stories of how we have been wounded and we gain our allies.

The whole congregation was polarized. I'm the new pastor and I've got a polarized congregation. I'm thinking, the Lord is impressing upon me, this is what I am discerning, to preach on forgiveness. So the next Sunday morning I come in and I pound out a Word on forgiveness. At the end of the service, I mean couples are still off to the side, polarizing the congregation. I go back to greet everybody at the end of the service, everybody walks out, nice pleasantries, except the mom of the young man comes walking out, I'm extending my hand, she looks at my hand, looks at me and goes, "Hm-hm." And right out. You know how awkward it is to hang when you are just hanging? Right out.

Well, the next Sunday I have an opportunity to preach again and I am going to come back to the theme of...forgiveness. It is not like there is only one passage in the Scripture that speaks on forgiveness, so I got multiple choices biblically. So, I'm preaching on the theme of forgiveness and at the end of the service, I go back to greet everybody. The mom of the young man finally walks out, I extend my hand, she doesn't even notice me...well, she notices me, but she doesn't do eye to eye with me, and just blows right by me, walks out. Okay.

Third Sunday, forgiveness, yes! Forgiveness! So, I'm preaching, end of service, out the door to meet everybody. Now, this time, you could tell she has an agenda. You ever notice that in somebody? Their countenance reveals, their nonverbals reveal that they do not have a non-anxious presence. She is all fired up, steamed up. She has a red head like a turkey gobbler in spring and she goes walking up to me and she is on a mission. She finally comes to the line. I've got my hand out, I just withdraw it when I see that she places her finger right at my chest and says: When are you going to stop preaching on forgiveness?

I don't know, maybe I lost my head. I said: Well, you know, when we start living it, I'll stop preaching it.

So, that week I paid a visit to the home and, you know, door opens, she sees who it is, thoom. Okay, alright.

So, three months pass and I am ready to lead worship again and guess who walks into the service, because these couples both vanished. Who walks into the service but these two couples and they are engaged in seemingly pleasant conversation and they don't sit at opposite sides of the sanctuary, they are sitting together in the same row. Thinking, I leaned over to the liturgist and I said: Do you see who is here? What do you think happened? And the liturgist says: Uh, they reconciled. They extended forgiveness, weren't you told? Well, no I wasn't, I wasn't informed. The last to know these things. Yeah, they reconciled through forgiveness.

Beloved, forgiveness is the foundation for reconciliation that will not occur without the extension of forgiveness, but even with forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean that all things will be reconciled. That does not always go that way.

The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 12 as far as it depends on us, live at peace with everyone. But not everyone is going to allow us to live at peace with them. But it does not dismiss or excuse us from appropriating forgiveness for this is God's heart.

So, just as I said it would be a safe statement say we have all been embarrassed, it would be also a safe statement to say we have all experienced hurt. We have been inflicted with painful words and sometimes actions. And we've absorbed that and held on to that and sometimes we've nurtured that. We nurture that hate, it goes unresolved, it morphs often into bitterness. Bitterness, not addressed, evolves quickly into resentment and resentment can transform into full blown hatred. It's a huge dilemma.

John addressed it. He must have contended with the same thing in his first century generation because he challenges the beloved in his first chapter: how can you say in one breath that you love God and in the next breath you hate your brother? Fresh water, salt water do not flow out of the same spring. There is something wrong with this to say: I love God with all my heart, soul, body, mind and then say: I hate that person.

Psalm 139 which is an incredible Psalm, it's a Psalm of David, at the very end of the Psalm, the Psalm is so incredibly eloquent: Lord, you search me and you know me. You know where I sit when I rise. You perceive my thoughts from afar. That's how he starts. At the end of the Psalm he writes: Lord, don't I hate those who hate you. I despise those who turn away from you. And then his next line is: Search me, O God, and know my heart. I know exactly what God is going to be revealing to him: his hatred.

Beloved, we have multiple options that we might choose from to respond to forgiveness, respond to hurt and one of those options is revenge. Commonly practiced, it's a considered option by many: you hurt me, I hurt you. You talk that way to me, I just ignore you or talk that

way to you. There is a bumper sticker that says: You toucha my truck, I smasha you face. You do this, I do that. And a lot of us understand that too. It's an option for many.

I'm driving, conducting a hospital visit here in Harrisburg and that drive back to Waymart which is just a bedroom community of State College and I'm driving 322 up that seven mountains range and a lot of you have been on it a lot of times and there is a coal truck in front of me doing no more than 15-20 miles an hour. I look in my rearview mirror and there is a guy behind me but he is quite a distance, so passing lane, turn signal, out in passing lane. I don't know if it was as soon as I turned the turn signal on or when I made my move in the passing lane. This guy who was quite a distance from me closes the gap quickly, must have floored his accelerator because the next thing I know I'm being honked at. There is a guy behind. I immediately looked in my rear view mirror and this guy is offering me inappropriate gestures, honking at me. Did that ever happen to you? And I'm sure you responded with a very non-anxious presence. Something just flared up within me. What would you guys have done? Look at these guys, they are laughing. That means they are guilty. Look at these guys. Okay, so we've all experienced these kind of things. So I have options in the moment. The guy is offering me inappropriate gestures, honking his horn behind me, I am just beside the coal truck. And I think: I'm going to choose the option of slowing down to the speed of the coal truck, doing 15 miles an hour up seven mountains and watch this guy go ballistic in my rear view mirror and, Beloved, I am basking in the euphoria of thinking the rotten guy got his. And then showing some benevolence, I finally pull over and he goes flying by me and I'm smiling and driving and then the still small voice of the Spirit, do you understand that terminology? Nothing audible from God, the still small voice of the Spirit: Stephen, this did not honor me. Ah...didn't help that I was specifically studying in Bible study Romans 12 where it says specifically: Do not return evil with evil but return evil with good. And I hadn't. And I felt the weight of that conviction. I literally pulled off the side of the...nobody is in my car, I pulled off to the side of the road, confessed that, get back on the road and find myself behind the coal truck again. God's humor.

We have options. We can say revenge, we just push people away, ignore people. You did that to me, I'm just going to ignore you. We could tell everybody else what happened, so that we can become the victim in the process, or we can choose to forgive. God's point of view, God's options: not a long list, there is only one on it and that is to forgive. People say...I had a woman in my office and she was sharing some horrific kind of stories and it was really painful and I'd be in talking with her about forgiveness and boy, she blew up in my face: How could you possibly say that. You don't know how deeply I've been hurt. You are exactly right, I don't and you don't know how deeply I've been hurt and we really don't know exactly how deeply Jesus was hurt, but it was Jesus on the cross: Father, forgive them. They know not what they do. No one at the foot of the cross saying: Well, Jesus we are really sorry we put those spikes in your hands and drove them through your feet. Sorry we put that spear in your side. Look, Father, forgive them. They don't know what they do.

Forgiveness emanates from God because of God's mercy, God's grace, all rooted in the fact

that God is love and provides forgiveness for a fresh start and new beginning. Forgiveness, Beloved, is forfeiting the right to establish blame and in my own strength is not a matter of my clenching my fists and gritting my teeth and saying: Okay, I'll forgive you. It's simply offering to others what I have received myself. Just as new life comes to me on the way to somebody else, so forgiveness is received to be extended to others and it might not seem like that is the common or classic way to respond because we react to hurtful inflictions and painful experiences, but God says: Forgive.

If I say the name Charles Roberts to you, does that sound familiar to anybody? What if I would couple it with the name Nickel Mines? Lancaster County Nickle Mines, Charles Roberts, the man who pulled his truck tight up against the doors of the Amish schoolhouse, got in the Amish schoolhouse, ordered all the young men out and the teachers out, lined up all those young women, shot them all, five of them to death, a couple survived. This was not just a local event, this hit national. And the headlines of all the newspapers in that season were: Forgiveness. Because this is what the Amish community was stating to we English: forgiveness. A lot of people scratched their heads and said: No, no, no, this doesn't happen. But the leaders within that community said: We have really no other option that would honor God. We are all hurting, we are all broken, we are all grieving, but just as we have been forgiven, we choose to forgive and the remainder of that story and how it went just far beyond verbal but how it was acted out and the way the conducted themselves and cared for the family of the one who murdered their kids was a testament to God's love and grace.

Saw it play out recently in a courtroom as the brother of one who lost his life choose to forgive the one who took that life in an embrace in the courtroom and people said: How? Christ compels and moves us to forgive. Even when you talk about a subject like this, when you talk about wounds and hurts and offenses, like who pops up? Who comes to mind? What relationship has been so damaged because of inappropriate behavior and maybe our response to it?

The Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 1:27: Whatever happens, conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the Gospel. Freely we have received. Freely we are called and compelled. This is what this is all about.