**4th Sunday in Lent – Year C – March 10, 2013 – Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY**

**Based on Judges 10:6-16 written by Pastor Paul Horn**

**Thank God that he is not like us**

**I. We continue to fall into destructive patterns**

**II. He continues to be full of constructive pardon**

*6 Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines. And because the Israelites forsook the Lord and no longer served him, 7 he became angry with them. He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites, 8 who that year shattered and crushed them. For eighteen years they oppressed all the Israelites on the east side of the Jordan in Gilead, the land of the Amorites. 9 The Ammonites also crossed the Jordan to fight against Judah, Benjamin and Ephraim; Israel was in great distress. 10 Then the Israelites cried out to the Lord, “We have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals.” 11 The Lord replied, “When the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, 12 the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonitesoppressed you and you cried to me for help, did I not save you from their hands? 13 But you have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you. 14 Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!” 15 But the Israelites said to the Lord, “We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now.” 16 Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the Lord. And he could bear Israel’s misery no longer.*

Have you read the book of Judges before? If you haven’t I’ll tell you that it is full of debauchery, immorality and perversion and at times reads more like an HBO or Showtime mini-series. Even if you are familiar with the book allow me to set the scene.

If you recall, Moses led the nation of Israel, 2million people, out of Egypt. They wandered in wilderness for forty years because of their unbelief. After those 40 years Moses led them to the boarders of Canaan. There Moses died. His right-hand man, Joshua, led the nation across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land, Canaan, present day Palestine and Israel. Joshua then commanded the armies of Israel in a military campaign against all of the nations living in Canaan. The LORD wanted a pure nation, not influenced by godless neighbors. But Judges chapter 1 tells us that Israel simply failed to carry out the LORD’s directives to drive the Canaanites out of the land. This failure in military matters led to the moral decay described in the following chapters. The infection of the Canaanite idolatry, which the LORD wished to have eradicated, was left to spread.

The book of Judges can be illustrated by a spiral staircase that goes down and around, down and around, and is marked by this cycle: 1) the people would fall away from the worship of the true God and worship false gods, 2) God would discipline them and send an enemy nation to oppress them for a while, 3) the people would cry out for mercy, 4) the LORD would have compassion, in his love and mercy he would raise up a judge.

Judges were very special leaders, often military heroes. Sometimes after they carried out their act of deliverance they continued to rule over God’s people for many years. Other times they merely served to drive away Israel’s enemy or relieve its oppression in a time of crisis. Some were great national heroes, like Samson, others have no great warlike deeds recorded, but simply state that they ruled over Israel for a certain number of years. In one case, the judge happened to be a prophetess, a woman named Deborah.

This downward spiral repeated for 350 years. In our story this morning we find the people of Israel in the middle of one of these destructive patterns. The LORD disciplined his people because they had abandoned him yet again. He sent the armies of the Ammonites from the east of the Jordan River who marched west. He sent the Philistines from the west who marched east. In vs.8 we read that these armies crushed and shattered them, for eighteen years. Not only were the Israelites losers on the battlefield, what often happened is that enemy nations carried off their daughters and wives as slaves, ruined their harvests or took it for themselves, and drove away their flocks and herds. The people recognized that this bitter oppression was due to their sin of unfaithfulness to the LORD. The people confessed to the LORD, “**We have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals**.” (Baal was one of the false gods the people worshiped.)

But why should God continue to have compassion? Why should he show love to them? They were like a teenage daughter who got caught stealing money from mom’s purse. She was sorry only because she got caught. The parents forgave her, but put money back in the purse, only to catch her again and again, stealing from mom’s purse. Yet the parents continued to forgive her. Why should they? Wouldn’t this be foolishness on the part of God for him to forgive his people yet again? And in vs.14 he replied to them, **“Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!”** The LORD wanted them to think about their self-destructive pattern.

When I read through the book of Judges this week I couldn’t help but think of Lindsay Lohan, the actress who has starred in such movies as *Parent Trap, Herbie Fully Loaded, Mean Girls.* Her life is a downward spiral. She crashed her car, went to rehab, was arrested for driving under the influence, went back to rehab, arrested for driving under the influence again, back to rehab, to jail for five hours, served house arrest, appeared in court nine times in 10 months, and it continues… You feel sorry for someone like that, and you pray that she does not end up like so many others in Hollywood whose poor choices have found them lying in a coffin. Pray that someone would share the good news of Jesus with her so that she knows there is something better, new life in Jesus.

It’s easy to sit here and point the finger at others and their destructive patterns. Ms. Lohan is not alone. Don’t we have to admit that we at times fall into destructive patterns in our lives, fall into the same sin or sins again and again? Which ones are they for you? The ones you keep falling into again and again…

Your sins may not be as public as Ms. Lohan, but they are just as destructive, damaging your relationship with others, and most importantly, destroying your relationship with your heavenly Father.

I think that one of the sins we continue to fall into that damages our relationship with others more than anything are the sins of the tongue. The things we say hurt and offend others. When we say things in anger to others when they disappoint us, how do we typically handle it? Too often we lash out, even at the ones we love, a spouse, parents with children, children lash out at their parents. How damaging are those words of anger? How damaging are the words that fall from our chattering lips – discussing the faults of others in the privacy of our own homes. This talk does not build others up but tears them down. How many times must they forgive us for what we’ve done to them? How many times must our Father forgive us for the things we’ve said in anger?

On the other hand, when others are caught in a destructive pattern they often harm us. How many times will I forgive them? So often, we do not forgive. Because it is hard for us to look past the harm was done to us, especially when someone sins against us again and again. Yet even though they are the ones who fall into the pattern of offending us again and again, we fall into the pattern of failing to forgive, again and again. How many times will God forgive us for failing to offer free and loving forgiveness? Surely he has a limit to forgiveness, his patience with us! Sadly, I know that I do…

Thank God that he is not like us. He is divine, not human, and his response is toward us is love. He demonstrates his love for his people during the time of the Judges. God asks, “How many times must I forgive you?” The Israelites said “We’re sorry,” but like the teenage daughter who continues to steal money and says sorry because she got caught, they had done that before, only to go back to their same destructive patterns. This time they demonstrated true repentance, “**Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the LORD.”** The writer tells us, “**And [the LORD] could bear their misery no longer**.” His heart ached for them, the way a father does when he sees his child hurt. His children, the people of Israel, were suffering from the oppression by their enemies, suffering from the guilt of their sin. And the Father, all he wants to do is to reach out and love that child, the compassionate and gracious Father. He proved his love and compassion. He sent a judge to deliver them. You can read about Jephthah in the next chapter. He led the people into battle against their enemies and defeated them, and there was peace again in the land.

We see our Father’s love for us, clearly seen in Jesus… his life was not like ours. It could be described as an spiral staircase that goes straight up, up to heaven, a life of good choices, a life characterized by constructive behavior, filled with love and forgiveness… Jesus was the one who freely announced forgiveness to the woman who had lived a sinful life when no one wanted anything to do with her. Jesus was the one who held out forgiveness to those who stretched out his arms to crucify him. And it was he who announced forgiveness to Peter and disciples after they had abandoned him and denied him.

Who does that? Who gives forgiveness to those who do not deserve it? To obvious sinners? The same God who chose to be nailed to the cross for you and me. God the Father loved you so much, that he forgave you for the sake of his son Jesus, who lived and died for you.

When I look at how I have continually sinned against my fellow man, and how I sin against my heavenly Father again and again, I could be tempted to wonder, “Has he really forgiven me?” He is the same God who extends the invitation to you again and again to receive the forgiveness of sins at this altar. Through his Son’s body and blood, with this bread and wine, he says, “Come! Eat and drink for the comfort of knowing the guilt of past sins has been removed from your soul.” He is the same God who continues to remind me again and again in his Word, “I have put your sins out of sight, out of reach, out of mind, out of existence.” Like this promise from Isaiah, “I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist.” (Isaiah 44.22) I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.” (Isaiah 43.25) You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.” (Micah 7.19)

Since God forgives you again and again, how much will you forgive? How many times will someone sin against you, and you forgive them? Peter asked the Teacher that same question and offered, “Up to seven times?” Our Lord said to Peter, “Not seven times, but seventy times seven.” That is how we will forgive, unconditionally. And when we sin against someone else, with our tongue, and offend and hurt them, how many times will we, in great Christian humility offer our sincere apologies and turn from that sin? As many times as the Father forgives us…

What might happen when we are more forgiving, more repentant, and more constructive? Could it be that we might be led to love each other more, and build each other up more? And when we point people to God’s love and his forgiveness, could it be that there is more peace, more unity between spouses, parents and children, and church members, friends and coworkers? Could it happen that there will be more consciences that are no longer plagued by past sins when we forgive and love and forget? Yes, all things are possible with God. Even the impossible, like loving us when we sin against him again and again, even the impossible, like loving his people during the history of the judges.

That period of time during the judges has been themed, “Everyone did as he saw fit,” and it was true. (Judges 21:25) But perhaps we could change the theme of that book, and say that the book of Judges is a story about God’s love, which is seen even in the darkest periods of his people’s history. When we look back on our lives, may we say the same for us, too. That the story of our lives was really the story of God’s love for a sinner such as me. Thank God that is not like us, that he is full of amazing grace… how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see. Amen.