

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
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God Promises an Awesome Thing

Exodus 34:1, 4-10

Key verse: “The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness’” (Exodus 34:6)

Did you hear the story about the teacher who was helping one of her kindergarten students put on his cowboy boots? He asked for help, and she could see why. Even with her pulling and him pushing, the little boots still didn't want to go on. By the time they got the second boot on, she had worked up a sweat. She almost cried when the little boy said, “Teacher, they're on the wrong feet.” She looked, and sure enough, they were.

It wasn't any easier pulling the boots off than it was putting them on. She managed to keep her cool as together they worked to get the boots back on, this time on the right feet. The little boy then announced, “These aren't my boots.” The teacher bit her tongue rather than get right in his face and scream, “Why didn't you say so?!”

Once again, she struggled to help him pull the boots off his little feet. No sooner had they gotten the boots off when he said, “They're my brother's boots. My mom made me wear 'em.” Now she didn't know if she should laugh or cry, but she managed to wrestle the boots onto his feet once more.

Helping him with his coat, she asked, “Now, where are your mittens?”

He answered, “I stuffed 'em in the toes of my boots.”

In a more serious context, Exodus 34 reveals that one of God's attributes is that of being “merciful and gracious, slow to anger” (v. 6). The Israelites had doubted God at the Red Sea. They had “grumbled” against God in the wilderness. More recently, they had defied God with their idolatrous “golden calf” episode. In his anger with the people, Moses had broken the stone tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments (Exodus 32).

But Moses had also interceded for this “stiff-necked” people. He begged God to forgive them and not to leave them. Moses also asked God to “show me your glory” (Exodus 33:18).

God answered Moses' prayers by calling Moses back to Mount Sinai, where God renewed His covenant relationship with Moses and with Israel. There on the

mountain, God again gave the people the Ten Commandments, and God revealed something quite significant about God's character and God's nature: "The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness'" (Exodus 34:6)

At the heart of God are these defining characteristics: God is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." What a beautiful and comforting revelation. Yet, in the next verse, God says two other things about Himself that may seem problematic. In verse 7, God tells Moses that He is a God "keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." Sounds great, so far. But then God tells Moses that He is a God "by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and fourth generation."

So the problem is, how can God be merciful, gracious, and forgiving, and yet not "clear the guilty"? One of the best ways to understand this seeming contradiction is to see how other Old Testament writers used this passage, Exodus 34:6-7. One example is the prophet Joel. In Joel 2:12-13, God says to His "stiff-necked" people: "Yet even now return to me with all your heart and with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts not your garments." Then Joel quotes from Exodus 34:6 when he says: "Return to the Lord, your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

The prophet Joel's interpretation of Exodus 34:6-7, then, is that our gracious and merciful God is willing to forgive us if we will repent from sin and return to Him. The people who God cannot forgive are those who refuse to turn from their sin and return to God.

Now, what about God's statement about "visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation"? The most likely way to understand these words is to realize that God does not punish innocent children for sins that their parents committed. However, God does allow the effects of the parents' sins to take their natural course. For example, just look at the hate and prejudice between races and cultures that spreads across the generations like a terrible disease. Or think about the multi-generational effects of family dysfunction and abuse.

It is sobering to realize that sin from which we will not repent can infect and hurt our children and our grandchildren!

But the revelation here in Exodus 34 is primarily one of a merciful and gracious God. In verses 8-9, we see Moses again interceding for the people of Israel. Moses prays that God will "go with" the people of Israel... "pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance." God responds to Moses' prayer by renewing God's covenant relationship with the Israelites: "I hereby make a covenant. Before all

your people I will perform marvels, such as have not been performed in all the earth or in any nation; and all the people among whom you live shall see the work of the Lord; for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you” (v. 10).

In spite of their unbelief, their grumbling, their idolatry, and their stiff-necked rebellion—they belong to God! God has chosen them and entered into a covenant relationship with them. So, if they will repent and return to God, God is willing to forgive. Through Jesus, we too are in that covenant relationship with God, a God who is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” In spite of our failures, we belong to God.

I am reminded of Elysse Grinnel’s account of one of those priceless moments that comes to all families. She was sitting at the kitchen table with her almost-adult children. They began to share some of their childhood secrets. One said: “Mom, do you remember when the slats kept falling out of Ben’s bed, and we told you we didn’t know why? We were jumping on it.”

“I know,” said Elysse.

Another of the children said: “Did you know I didn’t eat my lima beans? When I excused myself to go to the bathroom during dinner, they were in my napkin and got flushed.”

“I suspected as much when I saw the bulging napkin accompanying you,” Elysse replied.

“Do you remember the peanut butter sandwich you found in the VCR slot? I put it there. It was the perfect size.”

Elysse said, “I figured.”

Finally, one of the oldest daughters laughed and said, “I can’t believe you still loved us.”

Elysse smiled and said: “It was easy, because you are my own.” (from *Christian Standard*, 1-4-07)

(Contact Michael at msigler@fumcfwb.com.)