

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Pastor David Fischler, on Sunday, July 29, 2012**

HOPE IN THE DEPTHS

Psalm 130:1-8

Guilt is a double-edged sword. I suspect we all know that. For the most part you don't think that guilt is a good thing but at the same time you've heard me say from this place that growing up in a Jewish family I learned that guilt is good. Especially if you're the mother of the house. Good to inflict, not to experience yourself.

Guilt is a double-edged sword and, since I doubt seriously that I could embarrass myself any further than I did last week, I'd like to begin with a story from my own past that illustrates that. This did not happen last week and, God be praised, it doesn't involve my wife. It actually happened before I knew her. I can pinpoint the exact day. It was election day 1975. That may not mean much to you, but in New Jersey on that date in November of 1975 we elected what are called "freeholders." As far as I know it's the only state in the country that calls its county commissioners that. I was working on a political campaign. I was taking a class called "The Institute on Political and Legal Education." One of the things that was involved in that class was being involved in practical situations. So I did a kind of internship, although it wasn't called that, with a political campaign.

Back then, I freely admit it bears little resemblance to where I am now and you don't need to know where I am now, but back then I was a Democrat. Morris County New Jersey was one of the most Republican counties in the country. After all, I'm Jewish, so I have a thing for lost causes. So we lost. Big surprise! We lost badly. That night at campaign headquarters we had a party. We all knew ahead of time it wasn't going to be a celebration because Democrats in Morris County in 1975 didn't celebrate anything. Instead, it was going to be an excuse to drink. I was 17. I shouldn't have been drinking. But I joined in just like everybody else, and the politicians were too interested in doing whatever politicians do under those circumstances and so nobody paid any attention to the teenagers at the party who were gratefully slurping up anything they could get their hands on. I was not a drinker. I didn't know much of anything about alcohol. So I thought I'd try everything. You can guess what kind of effect that had on me.

So on the way home – there were several of us – this was before people talked about designated drivers, but we did have one fellow who was a senior. He legally could drink, but he didn't, so he was driving and there were five or six of us in his Volkswagen Beetle. I was in the back, on the right side. There are some things you never forget. For instance, to this day I remember quite distinctly warning him that I was going to throw up in the back seat of his Volkswagen Beetle. Only he didn't hear me. Well, he did hear me but it was too late at that point. Of course, he was mad and he had some words to say and they were all deserved. He let me off at my house and no doubt went to find something really strong to get rid of the smell. I stumbled in, but to this day I have no recollection of turning a key in a lock. I'm sure I must have. It was about midnight and my parents

were already asleep. We were living in a very small two-bedroom bungalow at the time. It only had one bathroom. So I stumbled in there and passed out. I did manage to get undressed, but then I passed out.

The next morning my father got up to get ready for work and since there was only one bathroom, it was rather inevitable that he would find me in that position. That thought didn't occur to me the night before. He woke me up. He didn't say anything at the time. He didn't really have to. He just sent me along to bed.

Well, I began by telling you that guilt is a double-edged sword. Here's the double edge. On the one hand, I have never, since that day, never once ridden in a Volkswagen Beetle. Not even once! It's also the case that for years after that I would not go anywhere near alcohol. Part of it was just because it was a horrible experience. But part of it was because I felt genuinely horrible about what this stuff had made me do. I've remembered the back seat of that car. It has stuck with me all these years. It was an old car, but I just felt terrible about that. And to be found on the floor of the bathroom by one of your parents. It was embarrassing. It was a little scary, although the truth of the matter is that they never said anything about it. They let the consequences be their own reward. But I felt bad. I felt guilty about it. So I went through four years of college without drinking a drop. My name is permanently inscribed on a statue back at Rutgers. I'm one of only fourteen under-graduates who can make that claim. And Rutgers is 240 years old, so that's an accomplishment.

It's also the case that what I realized over time was that that guilt was preventing me from responding in a normal way when something very ordinary was placed in front of me. It's not that people have to drink, but one should not respond as though one is being given meth-amphetamines if someone offers you a glass of wine. It's really not that bad. And I finally had to deal with that over time. A double-edged sword. Good and bad. But one of the things I ultimately realized was that somehow or another guilt has to be dealt with. It's not enough to simply feel guilty for the rest of your life about stuff that you've done in the past. It has to be dealt with. And this psalm give us more than a few clues as to how that happens.

So let's take a look at Psalm 130 in 2-verse increments. We start off with verses 1 and 2, which is a cry from the depths. The psalmist begins by asking the Lord to hear him: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy." Now the depths that are referred to there is an allusion to the deeps of the sea. The sea is often used as a metaphor, especially in the Old Testament, for chaos or danger or the unknown and therefore to be feared. This may even be a kind of allusion to Genesis 1, where we are told that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth but also tells us that the earth was without form and void and the Spirit was hovering over the depths of the sea, the chaos that existed there. The depths that he's talking about here is an allusion. He is referring to the depths of guilt for his own recognition of the ways he has sinned against God. His request is not just for an open ear. It's for mercy. "Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy." This is not the psalmist looking for a Rogerian psychotherapist. If you don't know about

the psychological method of Carl Rogers, you've seen it parodied a hundred times. It's a method that goes like this: You go to the psychotherapist and you say, "Doctor, I feel horribly guilty about something," and he responds, "You feel guilty?" You say, "Yes, I feel terrible about something." He says, "You feel terrible about something." You say, "Yes, I don't know what to do about this," and he says, "You don't know what to do about this." This is a psychological method that involves the open ear and the empty head. The ears are open, but all that comes back is what went into them. I've often thought that you could set yourself up in an echo chamber and label it "Dr. Carl Rogers," and this would be about the same level of treatment that you get with that. You're not looking for someone to parrot back to you what you're saying. You're looking for them to offer you something. In this case the psalmist is asking for something he would never get from a psychotherapist of that sort. He's looking for mercy. He's looking for forgiveness.

So he begins with this cry, and then in verses 3-4 he describes what it is that he's looking for by way of who it is that he's looking for it from. The Lord is the source of forgiveness. He begins by noting, "If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord who could stand?" If God held grudges we would all be lost. Just like some of our relationships are lost. Anyone here hold grudges? Anyone here know someone else, a member of your family, a college friend, someone you work with, who holds grudges? If you do, then I can point out to you a broken relationship. It's not that you have nothing to do with them, it's just that that relationship is not what it could be. We all know what the effect of grudge-holding can be. It drives people apart. My mother died at the end of 2000, and she died an embittered person. She lived her whole life that way and I never knew why. My brother and sister-in-law unearthed some things afterwards that made them think that essentially the reason why her whole life had been lived in misery was that she spent it holding on to a grudge that had developed in her childhood, maybe when she was a teenager or even earlier. Her entire adulthood was poisoned by a grudge that she held against people who had been dead for decades. That's a horrid way to live.

Now imagine if God held grudges against us. Imagine Him with a ledger of all your sin. Now I know for a few of you that would be a little black notebook. For me it would run into shelf after shelf, volume after volume. But if He kept all of that and held it against us, where would that leave us? It would leave us condemned for all eternity, because while my mother's grudge against her parents died when she did, God doesn't die, which means if He held grudges they would be forever, which is another way of saying our eternity would be a misery.

There are an awful lot of people who think they can skate by on their good deeds. In fact, they picture God as having those ledgers. One is for good stuff and one is for bad stuff. And they're going to get to the pearly gates and they're going to see God open up those ledgers and He's going to count how many good deeds and how many bad deeds you have. If you have 47 good deeds and only 46 bad deeds then everything will be forgiven, everything will be okay. I'm afraid it doesn't work that way any more than it works that way in real life. Maybe you've made your spouse mad by not doing something you were told to do yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that and the day before that.

If you do that and in response you don't do what you're told or asked to do but instead, husbands, do you bring your wife flowers and think that will make up for it, despite the fact that I not only didn't do it for a week after she asked me to, but I never did do it? How many of you think that would work? Not a chance! We're not talking about something that has a one-to-one relationship. I can punch you in the face as long as I apologize afterwards. One's a bad deed, one's a good deed. That's okay, no big deal, they wipe one another out. It doesn't work that way. So if God did keep a record of sins, who could stand? He knows the answer. We know the answer. No one could stand. An honest accounting means that our punishment would be eternal and would be certain and it would mean that our relationship with God would be broken forever and ever.

But that's not how God operates. With Him is forgiveness. It says in verse 4: "With you there is forgiveness, therefore, you are feared." That means "therefore, you are to be respected." The truth is that I can respect someone who can forgive. I can respect someone who can be offended or put upon or sinned against and yet is capable of forgiveness. But God goes way beyond that because not only does He forgive, He doesn't stand back and wait for us to come to Him. No, He comes to us. And that's what Jesus' primary mission was about. The way that He died was about facilitating the forgiveness between God and us and He demonstrated that in His own life. Time after time after time we see Him going to someone, recognizing that they've done wrong and forgiving them. You'll remember the story of the woman caught in adultery in John 8. That woman was on the verge of being stoned by those who had rendered judgment on her adultery, found her guilty and were going to exact the Old Testament penalty for that, which was death. Jesus went to them and said, "You who are without sin, you go ahead. If you don't have any sin, be my guest." Of course, they all walked away because they knew that they weren't without sin, they weren't in a position to judge this woman. Jesus went to her and forgave her. He didn't say, "Oh, it's no big deal, it doesn't matter, everybody does stuff like that now and then." No, He forgives and He told her to turn away from it, because that's the way forgiveness works.

So the Lord is the source of forgiveness. The third part of this psalm may be the most difficult. Verses 5-6 are about waiting for the Lord. "I wait upon the Lord. My soul waits and I put my hope My soul waits for the Lord as watchmen wait for the morning." At this point three quarters of you will tune me out and say, "I don't wait for nuthin'. Not for nobody. I can't stand to wait. I hate to wait. I'm not going to do it. Don't even talk to me about it." But the psalmist is willing to wait because he knows the character of God. He knows that God is merciful. And because he knows the character of God, a character that is revealed in His Word, he knows that He will forgive those who He draws to Himself. We're not told, "If you grovel enough, if you prostrate yourself enough, if you do enough good deeds to make up for it, I'll forgive you." God doesn't say that. God simply says, "Look upon my Son. Look upon what I have done for you. Embrace that and trust the promises that I give in Scripture, promises that are fully consummate with my character, those promises will be fulfilled and they will be fulfilled in you." The psalmist waits expectantly because he knows that this is going to happen.

He says in verse 5 that “In His Word I put my hope.” Now that is significant.. This is not just a matter of religious feelings or emotional state. He doesn’t hope for his forgiveness because he feels all mystical about God coming to him and seeing visions and that God will speak to him with a voice that his ears can hear and he’s going to feel wonderful and everything will be great. This has nothing to do with us. It has to do with Him and His promises. Because He has promised to forgive those who put their trust in His Son. We will be forgiven.

There’s a wonderful story, and if you’re not familiar with this I’d urge you to get a biography of Mother Teresa that came out in 2007. It is primarily an exploration of her letters. Mother Teresa, probably the best single known Christian of the 20th century, with the possible exception of Billy Graham and maybe John Paul II. Anyway, the three of them are kind of like the trinity. The world knows about these three Christians who lived saintly lives and if anything Mother Teresa may be on top of the pyramid. She’s remembered for winning the Nobel Peace Prize. She’s remembered for her works of charity in the Calcutta slums. She’s remembered for giving her entire life for people simply to demonstrate the love of Jesus. In 1947-48 she experienced a series of mystical encounters with God that involved visions, hearing stuff. It was the classic thing we think of when we think of a person who’s having religious ecstasies. Those formed the basis for her call to works of charity. She went there and founded the missionary charity and for 50 years till her death in 1997 she led that organization and evangelized about what they were doing and who they stood for throughout the world.

But for 50 years after that, all that religious ecstasy from the late 40s disappeared. It wasn’t just that things returned to normal. It was that she felt that decade after decade that she was entirely alone in the universe. It’s amazing to think of a person who is so often held up as the epitome of Christian life and for decade after decade she felt like God simply had abandoned her. She prayed and there was nothing. She read Scripture and there was nothing. She worked for the poor and there was nothing. And we wonder how she could go on under those circumstances. How she could continue to live under the kinds of conditions she lived in day after day, right alongside the poorest of the poor, sharing their conditions, exposing herself to their diseases. How could she do that day after day, feeling like God had abandoned her? The answer is right here in Psalm 130, verse 5. That’s not necessarily what she pointed to but this is essentially exactly what she did. “I wait for the Lord and in His Word I put my hope.” She knew that no matter how dark, no matter how empty life seemed, no matter how much she felt like she was alone, she wasn’t. Even if she did not perceive it, God was with her. Even if she did not feel forgiven, she knew that she was. Even if she didn’t experience signs and wonders that demonstrated that the Holy Spirit was alive and working in the streets of Calcutta, she knew that He was because He had promised that He would be.

So the hope that the psalmist is talking about and the hope that we are called to see is not a desire to see something happen. And it’s not even necessarily the expectation that we will see it happen right in front of our face, but rather that hope is our trust that what God has promised, He will do. And that is a word that can come to us and hopefully does come to us and we can bring to people even in the depths of despair and depression, even

in the depths of financial difficulties, even in the midst of broken relationships, we can bring that hope that God will do what He has promised for His people and in the case of psalm 130 particularly that there is forgiveness with Him regardless of whether we feel it or not.

Now that leads directly into verses 7-8 where the psalm ends. Verses 7-8 make it quite clear that this is for all of God's people. This is not just an individual expression of the psalmist. This is not between him and God. This is between us and God. "Oh, Israel, put your hope in the Lord for with the Lord is unfailing love and in Him is full redemption." Can you imagine the impact of that upon a people that fell away from God repeatedly? Over and over again in Scripture in Old Testament history we see a people that demonstrates that they're not worthy of the Lord who had chosen them any more than we are. Repeatedly they fell into sin. Repeatedly they fell into idolatry. They even engaged in child sacrifice at one point in their history, giving over and killing infant children to a foreign god. I don't know about you but if I had been God I'd have said, "You people are history. I'm going to go find a better people. I know if I look hard enough I'll find them eventually." Fortunately I'm not God and I don't get to make choices like that. Because He continued to strive with Israel. His love for Israel was unfailing and His love for Israel was finally made concrete and incarnate in the life, death and resurrection of His Son. That is where the Lord's unfailing love for Israel is to be found. That's where His full redemption for Israel is to be found. He Himself, He says, will redeem Israel from all their sins and guess what? That is exactly what happened. He redeemed Israel from all their sins in Jesus Christ. And that's good news not just for Israel, but for all those whom He has called to Himself.

We don't know who God is calling and so for us that's a universal application. It goes to every single person that we know. We can go to every single person and say there is hope in the depths. There is hope, there is mercy, there is forgiveness, there is love. And you may not feel it now and you may think that your life is one long misery, but even in the depths light pours down upon God's people and in that light we see what He has done for us, the Source of our hope