

**August 13, 2017**  
**Second Sunday of Easter**  
**“Forgiveness of Sins”**  
**John 1:5-10**

Introduction.

On Wednesday, Adam Bowling and I watched the Little League baseball team from Greenville, North Carolina, win the Southeast Region championship, thus earning an invitation to the Little League World Series tournament.

It was special to me, because I helped baptize the star pitcher, Matthew, as an infant. I have watched Matthew grow from a baby to a 6 foot, 145 pound, 12-year-old with an arm that throw pitches comparable to a pro. “Matthew is really demanding of himself,” his mother told me when they were here a couple of weeks ago for the state championship. He does not like settling for anything but his best.

I know he does not like settling for anybody on base, I thought after watching him pitch strikeouts after strikeouts.

Watching Matthew, I recalled an article a few years ago in *Sports Illustrated* by Albert Chen, entitled, “The Problem with Perfection.” The article was about Phillip Humber, former pitcher for the Chicago White Sox, who began the 2012 season with a mediocre 11-10 record in 55 career games and an average of 4.6 runs given up per 9 innings of pitching.

Then on April 12, 2012, Humber pitched a perfect game, retiring 27 batters in a row. “For one magical April afternoon,” Chen wrote, “Phillip Humber was flawless.” He received a congratulatory phone call from the President. He appeared on the Late Show with David Letterman, where he read the “Top Ten List.” His name went on a plaque at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum.

But then Humber’s struggles returned. In his next three starts across, he allowed 20 runs in 13.5 innings. Seven months later, after finishing with the most runs allowed by any pitcher in baseball with at least 100 innings, the White Sox let Humber go.

What happened? Humber confessed: “After that game I felt I had to prove that the perfect game was not a fluke. I had to prove that I deserved to be on that select list of perfect game pitchers. I wanted to make sure that everyone knew that I am really good enough to do this.” So every time Humber took the mound, he tried to be the pitcher he was that day in Seattle. He pushed himself harder, but he kept falling short of the new standard he had set for himself. “I just feel lost,” Humber said. (1)

We may touch it for a brief moment, but most times the perfection for which we strive is out of reach. We can never remain flawless.

Mickey Mantle was one of the all-time greats of baseball. He hit towering home runs from either side of the plate. Yet Mickey Mantle struck out 1,710 times in his career. The homerun giant Babe Ruth held the record for the most strikeouts until his record was broken by the great player Reggie Jackson. These men are remembered for their home runs, yet they were also record holders for strikeouts.

## I.

In the Apostles' Creed when we say that we believe in the forgiveness of sins, we are first of all admitting that we *are* imperfect beings, sinful, and in need of forgiveness.

The word "sin" was originally an archery term, its literal meaning being "missing the mark." The "bull's-eye" on an archery target is the mark which one strives to hit. That is perfection, but perfection is difficult to attain, because the target can be missed by being off in any direction, too high, too low, too far to the right, too far to the left.

But the Good News is when it comes to our sins, we do not have to be perfect. We have one who makes the mark for us, one who makes perfection for us. That is what forgiveness of sins means.

This fall we celebrate the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's rally of the Protestant Reformation with his list of 95 statements about the church and faith. But up to October 31, 1517, Luther was a Catholic priest. As part of his training, he spent years studying. He was a brilliant and devout student, yet his soul was deeply troubled.

He was burdened with the haunting sense that his sins were not forgiven. He felt that God's judgment hung over him like a heavy weight. Being a priest only made matters worse. No matter what he did, he never felt assured that his sins were forgiven. In desperation, he went to Rome, hoping to find answers, but he came away even deeper in despair.

Then years later, while studying the book of Romans, he encountered the phrase, "The just shall live by faith" (Romans 1:17). Slowly his eyes were opened, and he saw clearly that God forgives us not because of anything we do, but solely on the basis of what Jesus did for us, through the cross and resurrection.

So Luther said that the phrase, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins" is the most important article in the Apostles' Creed. If that statement is not true, Luther said, what does it matter whether God is almighty or Jesus Christ was born of Mary and died and rose again? All those things have a bearing upon our forgiveness, and that is why they are important. (2)

## II.

Some people worry about a day of judgment. They have this mental image of God pulling up a list of all their sins on a screen. There in full view all their ugly deeds and words, all their secret sins, every dark thought filled with anger, greed, hatred, lust, pride, and rage for the whole universe to see. How could God ever welcome them into the kingdom?

“If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins,” the Psalmist asks, “if you gazed on our sins, who could stand? No one,” the Psalmist answers. “We would all be doomed. But we cry from the depths of our guilt and shame, and God says, ‘With me there is forgiveness.’ ”

And when God forgives, God forgets, expunges the record, deletes permanently, so that there would be nothing shown on that screen. That certainly cannot be said of any social media posts we have ever made.

But our sins? Forgiven, erased from the recycling bin, never to condemn us again. That is why Luther said this is the most important part of the Apostles’ Creed. It makes possible relationship with God. (3)

Conclusion.

The day after I watched Matthew pitch his Little League team to the World Series, I was called to Morganton First Church of God to be with the children there when they were told that a favorite high school worker in their program, “Mr. Cade,” had died from injuries in an automobile accident.

Cade was a left-handed pitcher, a rising high school junior, who was already ranked and being scouted. Yet the comments shared by Cade’s coach were not about his achievements and successes as a ball player but rather about his positive and encouraging influence on others. “When a player was going through a slump,” the coach said, “he was the first person to approach the struggling teammate to offer guidance.”

You may have seen the picture of what Cade’s teammates and friends did at the ball field. On the pitcher’s mound they placed his jersey, they spelled his name with baseballs, and they formed a cross with bats. “For those who believe in the cross,” the news article said, “Arrowood has rounded all the bases. Now, he is home.”

I do not have to tell you after this week what a flawed, imperfect world we live in, with accidents and incidents, errors and tragedies, acts of hatred and acts of violence. But there is one in the midst of this who offers forgiveness. If we can receive it and experience it, then our relationship with God will change. And as difficult as forgiveness can be, perhaps we can practice it with others, and those relationships too will change.

Luther was right: Forgiveness of sins—it is what is most important.

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Notes:

1. Tracy Jessup, "Monday Mornings," Devotional for March 18, 2013, Office of Christian Life and Service, Gardner-Webb University.
2. Ray Pritchard, "The Positive Power of Forgiveness: I Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins," sermon preached June 13, 2004, Keep Believing Ministries, <http://www.keepbelieving.com>.
3. Ibid.