

Sunday, September 17, 2023
Matthew 18:21-35
“The Power of Forgiveness”
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

A preacher in his Sunday sermon used “Forgive your Enemies” as his subject. After a long sermon, he asked how many were willing to forgive their enemies, those who had treated them poorly. About half held up their hands. Not satisfied, he preached for another 20 minutes and repeated his question. This time he received a response of about 80 percent. Still unsatisfied, he preached for another 15 minutes and repeated his question. With all thoughts now on Sunday dinner, all responded except one elderly lady in the rear. “Mrs. Jones, are you not willing to forgive your enemies, those who have sinned against you?” Mrs. Jones responded, “I don’t have any.” “Mrs. Jones, that is very unusual. How old are you?” “Ninety-three.” “Mrs. Jones, please come down in front and tell the congregation how a person can live to be ninety-three, and not have an enemy in the world, not one person who has treated you in a sinful way that needs your forgiveness!” The little sweetheart of a lady tottered down the aisle, very slowly turned around and said, “It’s easy, I have outlived them all!”

Today, let’s explore the power of forgiveness. Take a deep breath folks, this is a deep serious ride we are about to take in the name of the gospel. This is tough stuff. This is the part of the Gospel of Matthew that offers practical wisdom on relationships within the community Jesus is forming. A community of humility, forgiveness and accountability. It begins with Peter coming up to Jesus and asking, “‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ And Jesus responds, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.’” And then he tells this very harsh, very exaggerated parable. The parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

In this parable we hear of a man owing ten thousand talents. One talent was about 130 lbs. of silver and was the equivalent to about 15 years of a laborer’s wages. Which means that the servant owed his master, the King, about 150,000 years of labor. In other words, he would never, ever, not in a million years, be able to pay his master back. Billions of dollars in today’s world. Billions. His slave owed him one hundred denarii. One denarii, by comparison, was worth about one day’s wage, which meant that the second servant owed the forgiven one about a hundred days of labor – no small debt, but still, significantly less! How could the King’s servant possibly not overlook that relatively minor debt when he has just been forgiven an impossibly huge one? Think about this: the unforgiving slave actually brings judgment upon himself by treating his own forgiveness as a license to execute judgment on others. But then, if you ask me, he goes way too far with sending him to be tortured, right?! But let us remember parables do not usually convey a simple moral point as much as they are meant to cause critical thinking of us in trying to understand all the meanings but mainly to pull the blinders from our eyes.

So here’s the thing we learn from this very severe parable, Jesus challenges us to pursue **unlimited** forgiveness, and that is a sobering counterpoint – a sharp warning – to most of us who might think forgiveness is possible on limited terms.

For it to be limitless, we need to understand that it is never not present in our lives and in our relationships. The truth of this passage is that it sets in motion – deeply, tragically, painfully – memories of those people we have been reluctant to forgive. Think for a moment who you have been reluctant to forgive in your life. A corporation that used your best talent and then discarded you? A parent who abandoned you? A relative you abused you? A person who stole from you? A spouse who cheated on you? A friend who abandoned you?

It makes me want to ask Jesus, what about **those** wrongs, just to name a few, which are **really** unforgiveable? How do we forgive those? But as one pastor states, “perhaps it’s enough, at least for now, that Jesus makes me think again about the purpose of forgiveness in my life – when I need it, when I give it, when I hold it back, to ask myself, what am I waiting for? What still has to happen?” (1) Who in your life do you need to forgive? Who has caused you real pain? What holds us back from forgiving them? And let’s say it out loud, forgiveness is often times really, really hard.

The problem is that we want to control forgiveness, give it parameters, conditions. IF they repent, if say they are sorry, if take it back, then, maybe, we’ll forgive them. And often our resistance to forgive is rooted in our own resistance to believe that we ourselves can be forgiven. How can I possibly declare it for others if I don’t believe I deserve it myself? C.S. Lewis wrote, “To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.”

Several years ago, a close friend of mine sent me an email, saying, please pray for me, I’m going in for a biopsy and I’m very frightened. And to be honest, I said a prayer and completely forgot about it. A few months later I called her and casually asked how she was doing. She expressed how hurt she was that I never followed up to see how the test went. Never even responded to her email. I felt horrible. What a terrible friend. I was surprised she even spoke to me. I asked for forgiveness and she said something I’ll never forget. She said, give me some time. We have of course mended our relationship and are strong friends to this day.

I have heard it said, “Forgiveness is letting go of the hope that the past can be changed.” Because you see, forgiveness, is not something we do, it is something we discover. And let me begin by saying we as a church need to forgive ourselves. At this past week’s session meeting we had a discussion about the Secularization of society and the general decline of religion. We think the decline of church members, the decline of funds, of children and families as somehow our fault, maybe COVID didn’t help, but something we did or didn’t do, but this is not about our programs or leadership, our world, our country has changed. Our confession as a congregation is that we have been too focused on the decline that we haven’t looked to God. God is in all of this, changing God’s church and when we let go and let God so to speak, we realize the most important part of being church is not the numbers, but it’s in our connections with one another, our relationships.

Forgiveness is not something we do, it is something we discover. In our personal lives, it is also a process of discovering who we are beyond the hurt that has been put upon us. And this is what Peter was asking Jesus about. How to forgive the person who has truly wronged us, hurt us. And this process of forgiveness involves what I think are three phases. These are not steps because some may reach different phases at different times, and some may not ever enter the third phase.

The first phase of forgiveness involves knowing and truly loving yourself, recognizing where others have caused you pain, and seeking to understand the one who caused the pain. To know and love ourselves, involves that simple childhood phrase, "sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me". We can be harmed on the outside, but no one can take away our spirit, unless we allow them to. We must not believe in the voices that would call us worthless and unloved. Jesus was called the Beloved, and so are we. We were loved long before anyone else did, long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children and friends.

Because of the compassionate nature of Christ who suffered with and for us, we can allow our eyes to be opened to see our own self-rejection; and the sin of another. This involves coming to terms with reality; seeing life as it really is. Henri Sloan Coffin writes, so the first part of forgiving another is first to forgive ourselves. The raped woman, the robbed man, the abused child, must realize that they are not at fault, and must rid of the "if only I had" syndrome. Forgiveness does not mean denying our hurt or to excuse an unjust behavior. Evil actions are unjust and are sins. To forgive is also not to forget, but a process of seeking to love. "The voice that calls us the Beloved is the voice of freedom because it sets us free to love without wanting anything in return." (2)

It was the fall of 2020, you remember that time. My husband and I took turns going into the emergency room because only one family member was allowed at a time. Our son and his girlfriend had just been in a car accident. The other driver was texting on his cell phone and had drifted into their lane, they were traveling on an apartment entrance ramp, so they weren't going fast but there was a huge curb so there was nowhere to swerve off the road. The crash was head on and his car was totaled. My son had a concussion, and his girlfriend had a dislocated shoulder. Later my son said, well, the driver apologized and said he was sorry. Right, now I was the one who needed a minute – mother bear was emerging, he hurt my son, while being horribly careless! "Sorry", that's it?

The second phase of forgiving is to know the strategy. The strategy of releasing the power of forgiveness in love. Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evil doer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." "Vengeance is mine, says the Lord". But it's not ours, it's the Lord's to handle. Only God has the wisdom to know what consequences are needed in a person's life to heal and restore them. We must love our neighbors as ourselves. Of course, hardest of all, is to love someone who has hurt us, but if we don't, that pain can haunt us and destroy us.

When we are treated poorly, we want to retreat or retaliate. But if we stand firm in our beliefs, what we know to be right and true, turning the other cheek, forgiving in love, people will begin to see the truth in us. Henri Nouwen writes, "Part of the problem with forgiveness is that we think we have to feel positively toward the person who has hurt us and forget about what happened. We don't. And that somehow we should be buddies after making up. We don't. As a wise observer says, 'Forgiveness is not saying to the other party, 'you're okay.' Rather, it is saying, 'I'm okay, and I am willing to let God deal with whether you're okay.'" (3)

There is a story about a man who rides the bus to work each morning. Each day he is met by a sour, embittered bus driver who has only gruff words to offer his passengers. "Why," a friend of the passenger asks, "do you put up with his rudeness? Why are you always so courteous and

gracious when this man insists on insulting you?" "Because," replies the passenger, "I refuse to let this man dictate to me how I'm going to act."

"To forgive is to make a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of our judgment, however justified that judgment may be." (4) It is our choice to leave behind our resentment or desire for retribution. It is about maintaining an attitude of forgiveness, for willing it and wanting it helps in actually doing it. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, "Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a constant attitude."

The third phase of forgiveness, the one many never enter, is reconciliation. The ability of one to co-exist with those who have caused them real pain. For most, this third phase will take years to occur, if at all. For the offender must come to understand they have really injured someone. They have to face the darkness inside themselves. They must also accept our forgiveness and allow themselves to live in relationship. That's really tough stuff.

This parable is about radical generosity that must be paid forward, must be lived out in our relationships with others. Forgiveness, like love, cannot be commanded, but discovered, lived out and embraced as constant. Forgiveness, like love, does not give us the license to judge others, but the ability to love ourselves and all others. And so, let us try not to simply outlive all who are in need of our forgiveness. But be constant is releasing that power. Because to forgive ourselves, to accept forgiveness from another, to forgive another unceasingly, takes amazing power, a power that can only come from God. A God who loves us so much that God sent us his only son to die for us, a God who from on the cross, through Jesus, conquered the world with love, not hate; with forgiveness, not violence. A God who can teach us to release our pain by saying, "Father forgive them." For then and only then our hearts will be glad and our souls will rejoice, for we will know the path of eternal joy and eternal life. May it be so, Amen.

1) Lewis, the Rev. Karoline, Forgiveness 101, 9/10/2017.

2) Coffin, Dr. Henry Sloane. Joy In Believing, p. 19,20.

3) Nouwen, The Rev. Henri. The Life of the Beloved, "Forgiveness: The Name of Love in a Wounded World", p. 15

4) Rule, The Rev. Craig, Church and Society, May/June 1998, p. 76.