

"PRACTICING FORGIVENESS"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

The sermon two weeks ago had to do with temptation. Today's sermon is dealing with forgiveness and it begins with a very important and penetrating question addressed to each of you. I hope you'll answer it in the quietness of your heart but with utter honesty. Do you have... do you possess a forgiving spirit?

You could probably answer the question with both a yes and a no. When it comes to the subject of forgiveness, there are always circumstances and conditions and limitations and varying qualifications to the answer that we give.

However, as we gather here this morning, we know that forgiveness is central to the "living out" of our Christian faith and calling. We pray every week in our Lord's Prayer the following petition,

"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

And we further recite week after week in one creed or another that "I believe in the forgiveness of sins".

And yet, forgiveness is something so powerful that it can frustrate us and frighten us and freeze us into an assortment of human behaviors that can paralyze us in many detrimental ways. It can also "free us" to love more deeply.

DEVELOPMENT

From our Gospel reading for today in the 18th chapter of Matthew's Gospel, it so frustrates Peter that he asks Jesus just how many times should I forgive my brother? It's as though Peter was saying, "Preacher...make it plain"...so I can understand. And we further know by this time in Matthew's account that Peter had been traveling the roads of Palestine with Jesus from town to village to city. Peter had probably heard Jesus share great teaching stories and parables with the various groups of people as He taught them about the necessity of forgiveness and the grace of God.

This, too...perhaps his mind had already been stirred by the moving parable of the Prodigal Son. Perhaps he had witnessed with his very own eyes the attempted stoning of the woman caught in adultery and recorded in the 8th chapter of John's Gospel. Peter by now was beginning to see that this thing called "forgiveness" was an integral part of this new kingdom and new life that Jesus was ushering in. It was not just some theological jargon but a lifestyle of obedience to the very work of our Lord. Peter knew that forgiveness was both difficult and demanding to the human spirit. And he wanted to know just what he was getting himself in for. Peter, never being bashful to open his mouth, asked Jesus straightforwardly, "How many times shall I forgive my brother?"

Here in this text we see Peter then asking for help about the subject called forgiveness. And thank God he did for all of us need help and guidance with this thing called forgiveness. What are the guidelines for us as we "work" on forgiveness. And let me ask you again, do you have a forgiving spirit?

I've come up with three exhortations for your consideration about this matter called forgiveness that I hope will be helpful to you as you try to practice it.

FORGIVENESS IS DIFFICULT UNLESS WE FOLLOW CHRIST

First, forgiveness is very difficult for any of us,

unless we follow the example of Christ and even then it's not that easy.

Seeing the movie, JFK, a couple of weeks ago reminded me of something that happened shortly after President Kennedy was tragically gunned down in Dallas. A Methodist Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan wrote to the wife of Lee Harvey Oswald and said that they had heard of her desire to stay in America and to learn the English language. They took it upon themselves to write to her and invite her to come to Ann Arbor with the promise of finding her a home that she might get a fresh start on a productive life. Unfortunately, many persons both in the local community and from around the country got wind of this invitation...this plan...and began writing critical letters about their offer to the widow of Kennedy's assassin. One person probably described the situation most correctly when she said, "I've never heard of a church doing anything like this before!"

She knew that forgiveness is not often found even in a group of believers who could probably best be called and known as "Sinners Anonymous". Forgiveness is so hard.

The minister began the painstaking job of answering each letter that came across his desk that was both critical and unkind of the church's response. And with great sensitivity and patience he wrote each person a letter sharing that he understood their feelings and emotions about their efforts on behalf of Marina Oswald. However, he ended each letter by sharing this line,

"The only thing you have not shown us is that what we have done would not have been done by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."

Yes, forgiveness is never easy, but it is the will of God. It belongs in the life of the Kingdom of love, of right relationships. Forgiveness is not something based on popularity as determined by the most recent Gallup Polls but it a Biblical mandate reflected in God's salvation act at Calvary's Cross.

Freddy Snodgrass was a successful baseball player for the old New York Giants, but he was also remembered for one of his failures. Back in the World Series of 1912, Freddy Snodgrass dropped a pop fly. His error set up the winning run for the next batter hit a single. Consequently, the Giants lost the game and the World Series. When he died in 1974, the New York Times printed this headline which I clipped and saved for this sermon,

"Fred Snodgrass, 86. Dead. Ballplayer Muffed Fly in 1912"

Sixty-two years later and yet they could not forget his mistake. Never mind the fact that Fred later became the Mayor of the city of Oxnard, California, and was a successful banker and rancher and raised a fine family. He dropped a popup fly in the 1912 World Series and they couldn't forget his mistake. How different from Christ who not only forgets but also forgives them as well.

Forgiveness is difficult unless we set our minds and our hearts on truly following the example of Christ. That's point one. Do you have a forgiving spirit? Does it come easily to you? Are you working on it? Let's move on to point two.

FORGIVENESS IS NEVER EASY BUT ALWAYS GOD'S WILL

And that is that forgiveness is never easy, but it is

always God's will.

Some years back there was a movie entitled, "Stars In My Crown". You may not remember Freddy Snodgrass and the Series of 1912, but you may remember this film about an elderly black man who owned a little farm outside a southern town. As the story goes, some precious metal was discovered in that area and suddenly there was pressure on this man to sell his land, pressure from many people in the town. But he would not sell. He wanted to stay exactly where he was. However, the good people of his town would not take "no" for an answer and they did everything they could to put pressure on him to move. They burned down his barn. Shot through his house one night. And eventually threatened to hang him by sundown the next day if he did not agree to sell the land.

The local Methodist preacher heard about the trouble and went to visit the elderly man. At sundown of the next day, all the leading citizens of the community dressed in their white hoods came to farm. They were ready to hang this black gentleman if he refused to sell. The farmer came out on the porch to meet them wearing his best clothes. He said that he was ready to die and that he had asked his preacher - friend to draw up for him his Last Will and Testament which he wanted to have read at this time.

The minister took the Will and read it and those present quickly realized that this old man was giving everything to them. First, he willed the farm to the banker who seemed so "hellbent" on having it. Then he gave his rifle to another of the men there who had first learned to hunt with it. Third, he gave his fishing pole to another who had learned to fish with him as a boy. In fact, the old man gave everything he had to the very people who were preparing to kill him. He killed them first with love and affection.

They say the impact was incredible. Seeing goodness given in the very face of such animosity was just more than they could tolerate. And one by one, in shame, they lowered their heads, turned away and the entire lynching mob disappeared. The minister's ten year old grandson had been watching everything from a distance and as everyone disappeared, he ran up to his grandfather and asked,

"What kind of will was that, granddaddy?" And the old Methodist minister answered, "Well, grandson....I guess I'd say it was God's will!"

Something about that story that reminds one of the Good Friday scene and Jesus speaking words of forgiveness to those who were "hellbent" on ending his life. And thinking about the cross - and we'll be thinking more about it as we come into Holy Week and Good Friday - but thinking about it here today...about God and God's forgiving and self-giving love....it reminds me of those words of Issac Watts,

"Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were an offering
far too small,
Love so amazing, so divine...demands my soul,
my life, my
all!"

That man was able to forgive because he had been forgiven by his Father in heaven and he, in turn, could then pass on and share this wondrous gift of forgiveness in any circumstance of life. This man was able to forgive because he was close to the heart and the mind of God.

I love the story that's been told about a young man who applied for a job with the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation - better known to many as PennDOT. His application was accepted and he was given the job of painting the white lines on a country road by hand because all the machines were temporarily down, out of order.

The first day he painted six miles. The second day he only painted three miles and on the third day he only managed to paint two miles and on the fourth day he painted only one mile. His supervisor, who at first was very pleased with his performance, became curious as to why his "production level" dropped off the way it did. The young man replied,

"I'm getting slower and slower because the big paint can is getting further and further away".

Friend, if you find your ability to forgive is getting more difficult and further away from the will of God, perhaps it is because you are not as close as you once were or should be to the heart and mind of Christ, our Lord.

GOD'S FORGIVENESS CONTINGENT ON OUR FORGIVENESS OF OTHERS

And on to the third and final

point that I wish to put before you: God's forgiveness of us is contingent on our forgiveness of others. We need to be reminded of this from time to time.

The Bible here is very clear on this point. If we do not learn to forgive others their trespasses, neither will our Father "in heaven" forgive us. We must forgive in order to be forgiven. There is good reason for this. The love of God cannot enter an unforgiving heart and if we do not allow God's forgiveness to first enter us, we cannot pass on what we have not yet received. However, once we genuinely experience it, we can do nothing else but forgive!

Being unforgiving has the effect of locking the door of the heart from the inside; since our God never forces His way in or kicks down the door. We must first open it from the inside. Opening the door is an "inside job".

A captive was once brought before King James II of England. The King, they say, chided the prisoner, saying, "You know it is in my power to pardon you?" The frightened and shaking prisoner replied,

"Yes, I know it is in your power to pardon me, but it is not in your nature....."

The prisoner had been insight to know that unless a person had a spiritual re-birth that we have little or no nature to forgive.

The Good News of the Gospel of the Jesus Way is that it is both in the power and the nature of Jesus to forgive and to pardon. Yes, Jesus doesn't forgive the sin as much as He forgives us. He hates the sin, but loves the sinner.

Frederick Buechner in one of his books tells us that of the seven deadly sins, anger is probably the most fun! To lick your wounds. To smack your lips over grievances long past. To roll over your tongue the prospect of some bitter confrontation still one day to come. And to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are going to give back - this is a "feast for a King". But, you know...the chief drawback is that what you are "woofing down" is yourself. The skeleton at this special, sumptuous feast is none other than you - YOURSELF!

CLOSING I recall a story that was printed in Newsweek magazine. It's the story about the Memorial Service held for Hubert Humphrey several years ago. Hundreds of people came together from all over to say goodbye to their old friend and colleague. But one person who came was shunned and ignored by virtually everyone there. Nobody would talk to him. Nobody would look at him. Nobody would speak to him. You see, he was former President Richard Nixon who had gone through the infamy of Watergate not all that long before and was back in Washington for the first time since resigning the Presidency.

Then a very special thing happened...perhaps the only thing that could have broken the ice. President Jimmy Carter, who was in the White House at that time, came into the room and was about to be seated. But then he saw President Nixon over there against the wall, all by himself, and he went over to him as if he were going to greet a family member...and he stuck out his hand to the former president and smiled broadly and then the two of them hugged each other and Carter said,

"Welcome home, Mr. President. Welcome back home!"

And Newsweek said,

"If there was a turning point in Nixon's long ordeal in the wilderness, it was that moment and that gesture of love and compassion."

When you get right down to the full meaning of our text, it's not enough simply to say, "Don't keep score"...the real message is to find a way somehow to erase the score. Learn from it - yes, learn from it...but then find the opportunity to erase it and offer the forgiving word. Remember, too, there is room for all of us at the foot of the cross. And as we stand there at the foot of the cross in these coming days of Lent, two truths become so clear to us:

ONE: At the Cross we're reminded of our need for forgiveness.

TWO: At the Cross we are reminded that we are already forgiven.

PRAYER Wrestle with each of us, Lord, in the deep corners of our lives. And to forgive even as we have been forgiven. For only the brave know how to forgive and a coward never forgives. Help us to be the first to forgive...to smile and to take that first step no matter how hard it may be. We ask this in the spirit of Jesus who said, "Father, forgive them..." Amen.

Frederick Buechner in one of his books tells us that of the seven deadly sins, anger is probably the most fun! To lick your wounds. To smack your lips over grievances long past. To roll over your tongue the prospect of some bitter confrontation still one day to come. To savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back - this is a feast fit for a king. But, you know...the chief drawback is that what you are "woofing down" is yourself. This skeleton at this sumptuous feast is you - yourself!

A STORY WITH WHICH TO CLOSE

Time to bring all of this to a close. I do so with the story about a woman who heard that the "imminent return" of our Lord, Jesus Christ was at hand! This was the day - the moment. He was going to knock on her door at 3 pm for a short visit. And so she prepared herself and her house for this royal visit. At 3 pm the bell rang. She ran to the door and upon opening it she was terribly disappointed because there at her front door stood "an angry, bitter, cold, frowning, grotesque-looking person". She shouted at him, "Who are you? What do you want?" And Jesus said to her,

"Didn't you expect me to be here?" She shouted out, "You're not the 'real Christ'. He said, "You are absolutely right, I am not. I'm the Christ everyone see in you!"

Unless we learn to forgive seventy times seven the real Christ will never live inside of us. It's not a luxury, but rather it's a lifestyle. Remember, that Christ's way is always a way of love and forgiveness. Yes, it can be so hard. Real love can only be born because you have experienced God's forgiveness. So, remember that His forgiveness is both real and liberating. It will set you "free" to forgive others and - the hardest task of all for some of us - to forgive yourself.

WHERE ARE YOU IN THIS STORY

Where are you in this story. There's room for all of us at the foot of the cross. As we stand there at the foot of the cross two truths become so clear to us:

ONE: At the Cross we are reminded of our need for forgiveness.

TWO: At the Cross we are reminded that we are already forgiven.

PRAYER

Wrestle with each of us, Lord, in the deep corners of our lives. Help us to forgive even as we have been forgiven... all of this we ask in the name of Jesus who said to Peter...seventy times seven. Amen.