

June 18, 2017

"Forgiveness"

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Psalm 51:1-4, 6-11

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I'm going to suggest to you different words, and when I say these words, I want you to think of a face, a person, someone you know with whom you might associate the word. For example, the word resentment.... Is there a person that comes to mind? How about anger. Frustration. Shame.

Now my guess is that some of these words resonate with many of you because they conjure up feelings or memories about a disagreement, a quarrel or a conflict that's occurred in your life. An issue that still burns in your heart and mind because of some argument around money, lifestyle, possessions, jealousies, responsibilities, behavior, whatever. In some cases they're work related. But, more probably, they involve neighbors, or what were once close friends, or in many cases, some major family issue. And sometimes it's even the pain of something we've done to ourselves. And perhaps you've tried to push it aside where it sits smoldering, ready at any moment to burst into flame. Or, maybe it already has resulted in a full-fledged battle.

Like the story about two brothers who farmed side by side for many years. They shared machinery, helped in each other's fields, worked together. Until one day a small misunderstanding grew into a major difference, and finally exploded into a bitter exchange of words, and the two brothers refused to speak to each other. In fact, one day the younger brother took out his bulldozer, drove it down to the river levee and dug out a wide creek in the middle of the field between their farms so that they and their families were now physically separated from one another. The older brother responded by purchasing a pile of lumber so he could erect an 8-foot high fence and not even have to look at his brother's farm. Before he could actually get the fence built, it so happened that a man came knocking on the older brother's door, looking for some work. The older brother thought a few moments, and said, "Yes, I have a job for you. See that pile of lumber? I have to be away for a couple of days, but I want you to build a fence all along the creek, which is my property line." The man said, "I can do that. Give me the post hole digger and I'll go right to work." So the older brother got him all set up, and left town. When he came back and looked at the job the man had done, his eyes opened wide and his jaw dropped. The man had not built a fence. He had built a bridge – stretching across the creek, joining the two pieces of property. And coming over the bridge was his younger brother, hand outstretched, saying, "You're a much better person than I am to build this bridge after all I've said and done. Please forgive me." And at that moment, the older brother did, because it's really what they both wanted. They shook hands and

embraced, then turned to thank the man, but he just waved and walked away saying he had more bridges yet to build.

Now I don't know how your family story turned out. Or any story you might have about broken relationships or hurt feelings. But let me ask you, when someone hurts you, wrongs you, treats you unfairly, do you build fences or do you try to build bridges? The fences are so easy to build, aren't they? You can put them up quickly in your heart and mind, you can do it by yourself, and fences work! You don't have to talk to or deal with the person, you can do your own thing, and you prevent yourself from being hurt by them again. Bridges on the other hand, are much harder to build. Because to build a bridge, you must first begin with forgiveness. Forgiveness! And here's where we Christians often fall short. Webster defines forgiveness as the ability "to give up resentment or desire to punish, to stop being angry, to pardon." Biblically, we can take that a step further and say that forgiveness restores relationships and reconciles us with one another. But unfortunately we often find it difficult to forgive. So let me share some thoughts with you.

Let me start by talking about what forgiveness does not do. Forgiveness does not justify or excuse wrong behavior. Often we don't want to forgive someone because we think we're "letting them off the hook." And that feels like we're trivializing our pain and hurt. But forgiveness does not make a wrong suddenly become right. Forgiveness does not make an abuser innocent. When we forgive someone, or forgive ourselves – and that is also important – we don't have to pretend what happened was okay. Forgiveness only acknowledges that a wrong was done, it does not condone it. This is essential for us to understand, because it is only when we accept this, that we will be able to move forward.

Which leads me to two things forgive does do. First, forgiveness releases us from that heaviest burden, that heavy load. That sin of wanting revenge. Because, isn't it true, we want to make the other person suffer just as much as we have suffered. But as Christians we have to remember that revenge is not a right that God gave to you or me. God said, "Vengeance is mine. I will repay." So we need to leave repayment to the perfect, righteous judge, God Almighty. We have to bear in mind that as Christians, we are commanded to "treat others the way you want to be treated." We have to let go of those feelings that seek to "get back" at the other person. And forgiveness allows us to do that. Because forgiveness says, "I will let God take care of the situation. I will not let anger and a desire for punishment live in my heart any longer. Instead, I will place this issue in the hands of a perfect, righteous God." And once

you've done this, the burden will be gone. And you will be free to begin the process of healing and reconciliation.

Which then leads to, as I mentioned before, moving forward. Forgiveness helps us leave our past behind. We waste so much energy re-living those unpleasant parts of our past, reviewing them over and over in our mind. You know how thinking about a situation stirs up anger, upsets you, distorts your thinking, puts you in a bad mood. And that affects the way you feel, and more importantly, the way you treat other people. People who are important to you here and now. All because you just can't get over what's happened in the past. But forgiveness takes you over that hurdle. Forgiveness allows you to accept what you cannot change. You can't change what happened in your childhood. You can't change what's happened in your marriage. You can't change what your friend, your boss, your colleague, or a family member has done to you. You cannot change what you've done to yourself. But forgiveness will enable you to move on. Someone once wrote, "Forgiveness is the release of all hope for a better past." Listen to that again. "Forgiveness is the release of all hope for a better past." Yes, forgiveness helps us stop wasting our energy on something we can never change, and moves us forward toward peace and acceptance and a better future.

Now, as we work toward reconciling and restoring our relationships, we need to be mindful, that a right relationship may be a different relationship from the one we knew. An abused wife for instance may find the strength to forgive her abusive husband. It does not mean that she puts herself back in position to be abused. Remember, forgiveness does not justify wrong actions. There will be times when reconciliation does not mean going back to the old way. It depends on how deep the wound is, how serious the infraction. But reconciliation does mean that healing has taken place, and you are free to be at peace with yourself, with God, and with the other person.

That's why Christ was so insistent that we forgive others. He knew the healing power it has for us. He was very explicit about this when he taught us how we are to pray in the Lord's Prayer. He said to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." And after Jesus finished this prayer, the Bible tells us he said, "If you forgive others for their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." Those are some very no-nonsense words! And in answer to the question, how often should we forgive, Jesus basically said there's no limit: "Not seven times, but seventy times seven." You see, God expects us to forgive one another. Just as he has forgiven us.

Which leads me to the really hard part of today's message. Because if we look back over our lives, the truth is that we, probably, painfully, are not the ones who should be offering forgiveness. We are the ones who should be asking for forgiveness. For as much as we would like to blame others, in reality, in many cases, we have caused our own fair share of hurt and sorrow and pain and suffering. And like David today, we cry out, "I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me." We know what secret sins are hidden in our hearts and minds, and it is difficult for us to believe that God could actually forgive us. But here is the good and final word on forgiveness – God can and does forgive you and me. The Apostle John assures us, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." The Psalmist tells us, "As far as the east is from the west, as far as night is from day, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." And the ultimate proof of forgiveness is the cross. Jesus said, "This is my blood poured out for you for the forgiveness of your sins."

Forgiveness. I want to close with a parable about the power and impact it has on our lives. A disciple caught a tiny bird and asked the master, "What am I hiding in my hand?" The master answered, "You have a bird." "That's correct," said the disciple, "Now, master, is it dead or alive?" The disciple thought to himself, "If the master answers that the bird is dead, I will open my hand and let it fly away... but if he answers the bird is alive, I will crush the bird and open my hand to show him that the bird is dead. Now, master, is the bird dead or alive?" The master looked into the disciple's eyes, and said... "The answer, my child, is in your hands." Amen.