

March 18, 2018

*"Demons and Forgiveness"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 8:26-39

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Here we are, with two weeks of Lent left to go. And, as I've pointed out over the past few weeks, one of the key rationales for Lent is for us to "reflect." To "reflect" on how we've lived our lives, where we are now, and what might need changing. And I would imagine that as we reflect on our lives and the experiences we've had over the years, we could all probably point to some incident or experience where someone hurt you, or you hurt someone else. Think about that for just a moment. (Pause)

Now, not to dwell on painful memories, but I bring this up because the chapter in this week's Lenten study, *Creed*, is on forgiveness. And one of the fundamental tenets of our Christian faith is forgiveness. Yes, one of the most important tenets of our Christian faith is all about forgiveness. And that, of course, was personified by Jesus Christ through his great sacrifice for us on the cross. Through that act alone, we are a forgiven people. Our sins, our wrongdoings, are swept away. But now, if we are the beneficiaries of such "amazing" grace... God's forgiveness, doesn't it follow that we should offer that same forgiveness to others, and, even, to ourselves? And yet, we find this forgiveness thing so very hard, don't we?

So I want to start today by sharing a story about forgiveness that I've told before, but it's a story that reveals the awe-inspiring power of 'forgiveness'. United Methodist Bishop Will Willimon tells about the incident which happened in Belfast, Northern Ireland, during those troubled times back in the 1970's. He writes, "I met a young widow who was a hard-working devout Christian and did so much good for the poor in that unsettled city. In the course of a conversation, I asked her how her husband died, and she replied he was murdered. *Murdered?* That's right, she said. I kissed him as he left the house for work one morning, with our wee daughter at my knee. As he got into his car in front of our house, another car pulled up, two men emerged, and one shot him five times in the face. The other shot at me, trying to kill me, but my daughter and I were able to jump back into the house as the bullets shattered the door. They sped off. Paramilitaries, they were, IRA. My husband was a superintendent of the local jail and because of that he was considered a fair target. *That's just horrible.* It was horrible, she replied. They shot him up so bad, we were not able to let his mother see him before the burial. *How on earth were you able to go on?* Well, as I stood there over his body, I was in shock, not knowing what to do, and all that came to mind was to say the Lord's Prayer. I got as far as, 'forgive us our sins,

as we forgive those who sin against us'... and I stopped. Because the point of it all hit home. Lord, I thought, you have forgiven so many of my sins so I guess you are asking me to forgive these men of their sins. I will try to do that, but you'll have to help me every day not to destroy myself by anger. And the Lord gave me the strength to do that. I was able to forgive. I decided to let God be angry with them, punish them, or forgive them, or whatever the Lord chose to do with them. I chose to forgive. The gunman killed my husband. But I wouldn't let my anger at it all, kill me." I wouldn't let my anger kill, me.

That's a pretty profound story, isn't it? And there are many other similarly exceptional stories about forgiveness. In fact, we heard one in this week's Lenten study. Let's watch a portion of the video from chapter 5 of Adam Hamilton's *Creed*: "I believe in the forgiveness of sins."

Yes, Daryl's story is amazing – how he learned to forgive. How he relied on the power of God that enabled him to forgive those who wronged him, and live in peace. And that, as I said earlier, is the message of the cross. Jesus died to take away our sins. And even from the cross, he asked forgiveness for his enemies. And he calls you and me to do the same.

But it's hard, isn't it, when someone wrongs us. And, of course it doesn't have to be a murder or an injustice that needs forgiving. It could be abuse, a divorce, an indiscretion, or neglect. It could be that someone wronged you, betrayed you, hurt you, and you need to forgive them, but those demons of anger, bitterness and resentment hold you tight. And you replay the incident over and over in your mind, you want revenge or payback of some kind, you want them to feel pain or hurt.

Or, perhaps, equally important, it might just be ourselves we need to forgive for something we've done. It could be a sin we've committed, or an addiction we slipped back into, or a relationship we have damaged. It could be something we said or did that we desperately wish we could take back. And those demons of shame and guilt eat away at us. But regardless of whether we've been the perpetrator of a wrong, or the recipient of a wrong, too often we let those demons take control over our lives, over our thoughts and actions. And what happens? They weigh you down and they change you from being the kind of person God wants you to be – forgiving, loving, joyful, into someone who instead is tormented by those ugly feelings. Someone who is affected physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Un-forgiveness is not a pretty picture, is it? Let's go back to the video.

And that's the message we get from today's scripture reading. We looked at this last fall, but I want to review it again today because of how it applies to us during Lent. Because this is a story for all of us who live with the demons and chains associated with un-forgiveness. It's about a man whose life is full of demons, some of which are self-inflicted. It happens in a place called Gerasenes. St. Luke tells us it's on the opposite shore from Galilee. Galilee is where the disciples left their nets and followed Jesus. So that they might learn from him, and become like him. This is opposite side. The Scripture says that when Jesus got out of the boat, he was met by a man who was naked and living, not in a house, but among some tombs. He was obviously tormented, struggling with his past, and violent. So they put him in chains to hold and bind him. Yet, his demons are even stronger than his chains. But then, at the very sight of Jesus, those demons become afraid, because they know the power Jesus can have over them. And, sure enough, Jesus cast those demons out of the man, and appropriately, into a herd of pigs, which then run over the cliff into the sea to be washed away. Can you see the symbolism? And the man was released of his heavy weight. Yes, that's what God's forgiveness can do in our lives.

Now this story is told in three Gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke. So obviously it's important for us to get this message. Don't let the demons of anger, revenge, bitterness or shame, get the best of you. Don't let un-forgiveness torment you, control you. Because when you do, you are the one who suffers in the long run, destroyed by self-inflicted wounds. You are the one now in chains. Instead, let Christ have those ugly feelings. Like the woman in Belfast, like Daryl in the video, let Christ take care of the situation in whatever way he wants. As for you...choose to forgive. Forgive others and forgive yourself.

You know, the scripture tells us that after Jesus released the man of his chains and those demons, the man ended up sitting at Jesus' feet. And there, I can just imagine Jesus telling the man... come to me, when you are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest. I can imagine him telling the man... in this world you will have trouble, but take heart, I have overcome the world. I can imagine him telling the man... your sins are forgiven. Yes, I can imagine him saying... blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Forgive others and your heavenly Father will forgive you. I can imagine him saying... just as I have loved you, so you ought to love others. Amen