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“Forgiving Others”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Matthew 6:14-15

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This ‘forgiveness’ thing must be very important to our Lord Jesus Christ. Because first, he gives us this wonderful, comforting promise, “If you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.” But then, he give us a strong dose of “tough love.” “But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” Hmmm. Like I said – tough love. But before we get all flustered by what Jesus is saying here, let's listen to what some others have to say. Mahatma Gandhi said, “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is a characteristic of the strong.” Nelson Mandela said, “(Not forgiving) is like drinking a glass of poison, and waiting....for your enemy to die.” Mother Teresa said, “If we really want to love, we must learn how to forgive.” Mark Twain said, “Forgiveness is the fragrance that the flower sheds on the heel that crushed it.” And theologian, C.S. Lewis wrote, “Everyone thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have to forgive someone.”

And isn't that true? We all believe forgiveness is a wonderful attribute, but it's not at all as easy as it sounds. When someone has wronged us, slighted us, betrayed us, we feel hurt, shock, anger, disappointment, and our first instinct is usually to do one of two things. One, we put up a barrier that keeps the person physically and emotionally at bay. We don't want communication of any sort, and we spurn any attempt at reconciliation. Or, two, we have a desire to lash out and seek revenge. We want them to feel the pain we're feeling, we want to show them what it's like, we want to even up the score. These reactions seem to be part of our human nature because – haven't you felt that way sometimes? Yes, for many of us, there has been or is someone who deep down, we don't really want to forgive. And yet, we've just been told by our Lord, that we're supposed to forgive. But we wonder, how much do I really have to take? How often do I have to keep forgiving someone else? Well...the apostle Peter had that very same question. “So, Jesus, give me a rule of thumb. How often do I really have to forgive?” Then Peter quickly offers his own suggestion – seven times, maybe? That sounds reasonable to me. But Jesus quickly dismisses that idea. No, not seven times, but seventy times seven. Which, really means that Jesus has thrown away his calculator, and wants us to forgive in unlimited measure.

Now there is a lot that needs to be said about forgiveness. And Jesus expands on this by telling a parable about a King who decided it was time to do a reckoning and collect his debts. So he calls in one of his servants who owed him an astronomical amount of money – several year's wages. Obviously the King had been extremely generous to this man – giving and giving to him, not asking anything in return.

Until this time of reckoning. But the servant, unable to pay his debt, fell to his knees, begging the King for patience and mercy, promising to repay what he owed. And the King, knowing the man could never repay what he owed, “was filled with pity” and he not only released him, but he forgave the entire debt. The servant was able to walk out of there with a clean slate!

And this is exactly what God does for you and me. When we come in repentance, confessing our sins, seeking forgiveness for those mistakes we've made, God showers us with his compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and we too walk away with a clean slate. The psalmist reinforces this with his words, “As far as the east is from the west, so far will he remove our sins from us.” The apostle John says, “If we confess our sin, He is faithful to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” At the Last Supper, knowing he would die on the cross the next day, for just this reason, Jesus said, “This is my blood poured out for you, for forgiveness of your sins.”

What a freedom this is for us! And yet, isn't it true that sometimes we just can't believe God can really forgive us. When we think of our bad decisions, of the pain and sorrow we've caused others, of that dark secret we keep hidden, we can't even forgive ourselves. So how could God ever forgive us? But just look at who God has forgiven. Moses, the greatest leader of the Old Testament intentionally killed a man. King David, one whom God said, “is a man after my own heart,” committed both adultery and murder. The Apostle Paul, the most prolific writer of the New Testament, persecuted, jailed and stoned early Christians. These men committed heinous sins. And yet God loved and forgave them. Gave them another chance and actually used them for his purposes. And just think - God can do the same for you and me. Regardless of what we've done, God can redeem us and change us, and use us for his purposes. Isn't that wonderful to consider? Yes, God forgives. Just look at the people who killed God himself, in Jesus Christ. Remember Jesus' first words from the cross as he looked down at his accusers, his killers: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Trust me when I tell you, there is no sin in your life that God will not forgive. The prophet Micah said, “God will trample our sins under his feet and throw them into the depths of the ocean.” So take a moment and think about what sin or mistake in your life needs to be forgiven. (Pause) And think of God throwing that sin into the depths of that ocean. Now leave it there! Because he has promised you a clean slate.

But there was a second part to the parable Jesus told that I alluded to earlier. The man who had been forgiven and cleared of his debts by the King, leaves and meets up with a fellow servant who owes him money. But instead of offering the same compassion, mercy and generosity the King showed him, the

man seizes his fellow servant by the throat and demands payment. When this servant asks for forgiveness of his debt, the man refuses, and has him thrown in jail. Well, the King gets wind of what happened, and immediately condemns the first man and throws him into jail instead. And Jesus says this is what will happen to us if we don't forgive others. Why? Because, you see, we imprison ourselves when we don't forgive. We carry around grudges and harbor resentment that makes us hard hearted and adversely affects our moods, our outlook on life, our emotional and physical well-being, our relationships. We speak and act in ways that are unbecoming, and often create more problems. In truth, we are really only exacting revenge on ourselves when we don't forgive. Rev. Fredrick Buechner said, "To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll your tongue over the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back – in many ways it is a feast fit for a king." He goes on to say, however, "The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton that remains at the feast is you."

Now, there is another very important point I want to emphasize. And that is, forgiveness does not condone the offense. It does not justify or excuse inappropriate behavior. It does not make a wrong suddenly become right. And it does not necessarily mean forgetting. And in this regard, Jesus even said to love and pray for our enemies - those who have hurt us. Because by praying for them, perhaps they will come to the realization of what they've done, and seek forgiveness and change. And then you will have been used by God for his purposes.

You see, as followers of Jesus Christ, his disciples, we are to be a conduit of his compassion, mercy and forgiveness to others. Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "It is a matter of fact that you have already been forgiven, that some One to whom you owe everything – your very life and breath – that some One who has given and given and given to you and who has gotten precious little in return, has examined your enormous debt, and knows the chances of repayment are nil. (So he absolves you of all you owe, simply because he loves you. And) when someone like that has stopped keeping score on you, you feel sort of foolish keeping score on the people in your life. You feel sort of petty, wanting to write them off after seven times, or even after seventy times seven, when you consider how many times you have been forgiven yourself, through no merit of your own, but simply because God loves you very, very much, and wants to love you some more. Once you have let that sink into your heart, how can you, how can any of us, pass up a single chance to do the same?"¹ So let us go, as both the forgiven, and the forgiver.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven*. Pg. 98