

May 5, 2019
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United Church of Broomfield
Scripture: Matthew 6:5-15

Good Morning my family

When we recite the Lord's prayer, do you think about the content? When it gets to the part about forgive us debts as we forgive our debtors, do you pause?

It is fascinating the scripture in Matthew that follows Jesus recitation of the Lord's prayer focuses on forgiveness. Remember Christ accepted crucifixion to forgive us from our sins, forever.

Some years ago, while we were between Pastor John and Pastor Greg we had some pulpit supply. One of the most memorable sermons I have ever heard in our church was presented by Pastor Buonassissi. I do not remember his first name. He came to us via his son, Mark, who was working for me at the time at Blackjack Pizza in Colorado Springs. Pastor B was from the Baptist background. I am curious if anyone in our congregation remembers Pastor B. He only preached one sermon.

His preaching was a bit conservative and I remember being concerned that his sermon might not be a good fit for our church. What he taught us that day helped define my Christian faith and has stuck with me.

He preached on the cycle of forgiveness. Nobody ever laid it out for me in such a way and it made great practical sense. So, relying on the great and all-knowing search engine Google, I typed in "Cycle of Forgiveness" to get a refresher and voila, there was no match. There are many "forgiveness" matches. None mirrored his sermon.

There are 3 steps in the cycle of forgiveness:

1. The sinner must ask to be forgiven.
2. When forgiveness is requested, the offended party is required to grant it. Required is a charged word. There are sins committed so egregious that the mere concept of forgiveness is abhorrent.
3. The sinner must repent.

That's right, the sinner must complete the cycle by changing. If 1 and 2 are fulfilled but repentance is not, the cycle is incomplete. I'm sure all of us can imagine unforgivable sin. How then does a victim or sinner heal? Forgiveness offers both victims and transgressors the path to healing, however they must choose to walk the path. This may not be possible for some.

Now in a practical sense, many of us offer apologies. This is an offering of remorse, but it does not initiate a cycle. The cycle starts with the request to be forgiven.

Try it in your life. The next time you behave in a way that creates the need to be forgiven, start with an apology to express your remorse. Follow it up with a request to be forgiven. The first time I asked to be forgiven, it was transformational. By requesting forgiveness, I solidified my expression of remorse and acknowledged I was responsible. It made me vulnerable to the anger and hurt I caused. In a small way, it turned the table, allowing the other person the chance to vent their feelings caused by my actions. It did not excuse me. It did open the door to healing.

Granting forgiveness is also transformational. For the victim, it is the path to cleansing our minds, our emotions, our soul, healing. It opens the door to moving forward. Granting forgiveness does not mean I trust you. Depending on who it is and the nature of the sin, that may never happen. It also does not erase scars, physical and emotional. It allows us to purge the poison of hurt feelings. It also requires us to have compassion, understanding and a loving heart. The compiling of hurt and anger over time debilitates us. Over time these emotions come out and usually in a negative fashion. If we do not forgive, we hold on. Holding on to anger, shame, disappointment and dissolution acts like a ballast to our soul, ultimately dragging us down. The act of forgiving is cathartic.

Which brings us to the step 3, repentance. We must change. It closes the loop when forgiveness is granted. If it is not granted, one still changes. To ask is to acknowledge, the first step to our new choices. To express remorse, request forgiveness and commit the very same sin again is to slap the face of the other person. The act of acknowledging our sin allows us to heal ourselves, rebuild our lives and maybe in some measure lay the foundation for renewed trust. The power of becoming whole resides in our ability to request forgiveness, accept it and repent from our sinful ways. Forgiveness heals both parties.

From Desmond Tutu:

When I talk of forgiveness, I mean the belief that you can come out the other side a better person. A better person than the one being consumed by anger and hatred. Remaining in that state locks you in a state of victimhood, making you almost dependent on the perpetrator. If you can find it in yourself to forgive then you are no longer chained to the perpetrator. You can move on, and you can even help the perpetrator to become a better person too."

We are a forgiven people. Jesus made the conscious decision to accept his fate as laid out in the Old Testament, the ultimate act of love. He sacrificed his life in the name of forgiveness. So how do we honor God with our sacrifice? Be generous with forgiveness. Be like Jesus.

A prime example of this is the conflict in the Middle East which has been raging for centuries. Imagine for a moment if the cycle of forgiveness were to prevail. The generational conflict would evaporate, and the fertile soil of love would be tilled. Yet the vitriol persists. Have the combatants sought forgiveness? To do so would be to expose themselves to the vulnerability of culpability. Neither side wants to "take the blame", so the hatred goes on, passed down through the generations and the conflict endures.

How many families suffer this pattern? A sin is committed, and the healing power of forgiveness is never employed. Siblings turn against each other, people pick sides, families get fractured and all because we do not want to be held accountable for our choices. All the while the soil is poisoned. Love does not grow in contaminated soil.

There is a reason it is known as "sinful pride". It prevents humility.

What lengths are we willing to travel to forgive and how difficult is our journey of forgiveness?

Carefully consider the birth and death of Jesus. He came into the world humble. Born in a barn, his first bed was a manger. Think of it, a manger. A manger is a feeding trough for farm animals. He could have easily contracted a fatal disease. The Son of God was not destined to become a statistic of infant mortality. God had other plans.

Now think about his death. First, he is targeted by political leaders that fear him. They are in the seat of

power and Jesus is viewed as inciting the rabble, a horde of angry people that see a new king. He is a threat. Then, after his last supper, while he prays, the disciples nap. One of his own betrays him. As Caiaphas sought false evidence to charge him, witnesses falsely testified, breaking one of the 10 Commandments. For no reason they condemn him, spit in his face, struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, "Prophecy to us, Messiah, Who hit you?" After his betrayal and arrest, another of his chosen 12 denies him. Then it was off to Pontius Pilate for the chance at a Passover pardon. His humiliation continues as the crowd chants crucify him, while the "notorious Barrabas" is pardoned. The crowd accepts his blood on themselves and their children. Then Pilate has him "flogged" by the Roman soldiers. A bit of a funny way for Pilate to wash his hands and clear his conscious.

At the Praetorium he is stripped, dressed in a scarlet robe, adorned with a crown of twisted thorns, handed a staff and mocked by the soldiers, saying "Hail, King of the Jews" while they spit on him. Then he is given a heavy wooden cross, on which he will be nailed to die and made to carry it to the place of crucifixion. As he hangs on the cross he is taunted by passersby and the 2 condemned criminals on either side of him. Then as a final insult, after he dies, is stabbed in the side with a spear. Infant mortality would have been much nicer.

The depths of Jesus and God's love for us is fully arrayed in the garments of sacrifice and forgiveness. God gave up a Son, Jesus gave up his life on earth.

Jesus knowingly accepted his fate, the taunts, the torture, the gruesome death, to grant us eternal forgiveness. Can any of us imagine knowing ahead of time and still accepting such a fate? His life and death were the ultimate expression of love and humility. With an example like this to follow, what can we do?

The sacrifice we make to honor God is minuscule compared to the sacrifice Jesus made for humanity. The depth of God's love is based on forgiveness. As an Easter people, let's take it to heart. Go forth and live a life full of sacrifice and do your best to be generous with forgiveness. Request it, grant it and mend the soil for our love to grow.

Amen.