

Sermon September 14, 2014 Matthew 18:21-35 Luke 14:12-14 "Lessons for the Family"

Today we have celebrated our church family, long-time members, short-time members, just-now friends and visitors. And now we have heard two of Jesus' teachings, teachings that speak LOUDLY to any folks who are trying to follow Jesus. The teachings can be summed up in three words: forgiveness, compassion and God.

In the lesson from Luke, Jesus told us how to get the most out of our living: If you're having a party or giving a dinner, invite people who are in no position to ever pay you back! Not only will you step away from obligations where you have to invite so-and-so because they invited you, you will receive blessing from GOD because you did not welcome them in order to get something from them.

And in Matthew, after Peter thought that he was being more than generous in asking if forgiving someone three times was enough, Jesus gave us a really hard number to live up to and then told a story that, if we are honest, applies to us all. The king forgave a man a debt of a million dollars or more, wiping his account clean with a word. But as the forgiven man was on his way out, he saw another man who owed him maybe \$20, and he grabbed hold of him and demanded payment. Both men used the same plea for mercy, but only one received mercy. The one who received mercy showed not a drop of mercy to the other.

I read, in an old sermon, that years ago in recession-racked New Hampshire, a variety store in a small town forgave thousands of dollars in debts, owed by some 1200 customers. *The Christian Science Monitor* reported the story, saying, "It is news when a person decides to do business by forgiveness." I tried to verify this story, but my Internet search could only provide stories of thefts and debt reduction; perhaps a commentary on our modern-day society. Our society is not overflowing with tales of forgiveness.

You've probably heard the old story of how, long before the days of rabies vaccines and treatment, a woman was bitten by a rabid dog. There was no doubt but that she would die. As she waited in the hospital's treatment room, she asked that somebody bring her a paper and pen. The doctor, hearing of her request, went to see her. He asked, "Do you need to make a will?" "No," the woman responded. "I know I will die from this bite. I want to make a list of all the people I want to BITE before I die!" We may laugh, but it touches our lives. Forgiveness is a tough assignment. We who are Christian must not forget that forgiveness is *the heart* of the Christian faith.

Preacher Claiborne Jones told of a man who had grown up in the church, become disillusioned with religion as a teenager, and left the church. Years later his mother had pleaded with him to return to God, to find a church where he could feel comfortable. He wandered into an Episcopal church one day just at the point in the service where the congregation was saying the prayer of confession. He listened to their prayer, "We have done those things which we ought not to have done, and we have left undone those things which we ought to have done." The

man smiled, sat down in a pew and said to himself, "Sounds just like my kind of people." The man was right on target in his search and in his discovery. For those who walk into a church thinking that they are going to find a group of saints who know and show no sin will be greatly disillusioned, but those who come to church realizing that they stand in need of forgiveness will discover that they are in good company. We all stand in need of the forgiveness that God offers us through Christ; the difficult part is that the forgiveness that God offers and the church proclaims must be more than a one-way street or an IV dripping forgiveness into our veins.

In the Lord's Prayer, we pray, "...and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Somewhere I read a comparison of Christianity to a crossword puzzle. The vertical isn't do-able without also doing the horizontal... That's the way God has put for the Christian walk. God's "terms" require that we not exist in solitude, but in community. We are loved by God, but we must love. We are fed by God, but we must also work to feed our brothers and sisters. God offers us forgiveness, but *we* must also offer forgiveness to others.

This reminds me of the illustration of the man who had a field with a stream running through it and into his neighbor's field. One greedy day the man thought, "Why should this precious water flow out of my field? I will dam it up and keep it for myself." So he did. Soon his field was not good for anything but a rice paddy. All of his crops were flooded and rotted. So it is with us if we do not share the mercy and love we receive from God with others.

A young convert once approached a pastor with a question. "How can the holy God forgive a sinner? Isn't God repulsed by all the hatred and jealousy that fills people?"

The pastor looked warmly at his young, enthusiastic friend and said, "You are the third generation in a family of master furniture makers. Tell me, if a fine table that your grandfather made were scratched, would you throw it away?"

"Of course not," the young man exclaimed. "A scratch can hardly alter the character of a fine piece of furniture."

"And," the pastor continued, "if you nicked a well-crafted oak rocker, would you toss it out?"

"Throw it away?" the young man exclaimed. "Even with a few scratches quality furniture is sturdy and valuable."

"You have spoken like a true craftsman," the pastor replied. "You share that spirit with our creator God, who continues to find his human creation precious and valuable in spite of our obvious flaws."

Forgiveness. Forgive us our trespasses. As we forgive those who trespass against us. The first side of forgiveness needs the second side: in order to receive God's incredible forgiveness and mercy, we must share forgiveness and mercy with others. This is a *discipline* for anyone who would follow Jesus Christ. Were it not for God's love and power, trying to forgive those who wrong you would be for the most part a futile, ulcer-producing exercise of trying to hide even from yourself negative feelings. But God-with-us makes it different, and possible.

God's people have always struggled with forgiveness, both in terms of giving and receiving it. In the book of Exodus, Joseph, son of Jacob, was able to finally forgive his brothers for selling him into slavery, because he could put the whole matter into larger perspective: "You meant it for harm, but God meant it for good...God did something very good out of your jealous misdeeds." And Jesus, who was let down by his closest friends as they deserted him and even denied having known him as he headed for the cross, forgave as he received LIFE from a larger view: God's salvation plan for humanity. And the early Christians, who found themselves bickering and competing with each other, full of the attitude "My way is better than your way," really struggled to love one another and to forgive slanders and differences of opinions.

Today, how should we forgive? How many times should we permit someone to let us down, how often ought we let a person walk on our rights or lie to us? A hard question. But as we answer it, each for him or herself, we must hold before us the light of Jesus' reply to Peter: seven times seventy... A lot more than the "norm," for sure. A lot more than you think is reasonable. ***When you act beyond what seems appropriate, you are making a faith offering to God.***

Beautiful works of the Creator we are, full of nicks and dents and cracks and stains but nevertheless counted as valuable and useful in the eyes of God. By God's grace, may we participate in God's incredible absurdity: Forgive unreasonably and live in forgiven fullness of life. Offer hospitality to those who will never be able to repay you. These are Jesus' lessons for the church family and all who are a part of it. May they lead us all to receive and share blessing, today and forever! Amen.