

The title for today’s message is “Smudges and Grudges.” If you paid attention to the readings of the scriptures, you can figure out how I got the title. If you have spent any time being part of a church, you probably know how challenging and painful “smudges, grudges and judges” can be. (Should have included “judges” in the title, I guess.) Well, “smudges, grudges and judges” aren’t just recent problems; they were HUGE problems for the people in Jesus’ day and Paul’s day, too.

Paul struggled with the early Christian community. Remember that most of the first Christians were Jews, but then the Christian movement was opened to non-Jews as well. The Jews had been brought up to believe that the dietary laws, which had been given through Moses and can be found in the Book of Leviticus, were absolutely necessary for salvation. They also believed that certain days had to be respected as holy days. But the Christians who had NOT been Jewish before becoming Christian would eat anything, and they did not seem to care much about special Jewish festivals like Yom Kippur. This led to huge tensions in the early Christian community.

When I pastored my first church, some of the older members would tell me how, when they were growing up, Sundays were ONLY for church and family, nothing else. No bowling, dancing, or even card playing, not to even think of shopping! Sundays belonged to the Lord, and nothing else but church and cooking a big family dinner was to be done. If some of the folks from way back then came around us these days, they would probably be horrified and judge us to be totally “smudged,” even heathen.

We human beings seem to have an innate inclination to judge each other. A person walks into a room, and men and women alike run her or him through whatever mental judgment “programs” we have installed in our brains. Is this person attractive, appropriate, threatening, likeable? What will this person want from me? What can this person offer me? In greater or lesser degrees, all of us make such judgments. Sometimes, though, our judgment “programs” can be mean and destructive.

Paul wrote to Christians who were using judgments in unloving ways. They were accusing some Christian brothers and sisters of not being faithful because of diet or whatever... Paul corrected those who would judge, saying, “Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.” *God* judges. We do well simply to remember that our calling is to make sure that WE are doing our best to serve God.

Which leads us to the other really tough aspect of being a Christian: grudges. Grudges emerged early in the story of the Bible: the first child ever born so resented the fact that God liked the worship offering of his brother more than the one he had brought that he invited his brother to go into the field to see something and then murdered him. (Gen. 4) Grudges kill. They kill friendships, they kill families, they kill the person holding them if the person does not learn to let them go.

Here's a story of a destructive grudge. The neighbors had lived next door to each other for fourteen years, since as young couples they had purchased houses and started their families. They grew close. They went to the same church, and the husbands worked for the same company. Each couple had three children. One day, the eight-year old son of one family lost control of his bicycle as he was riding down a hill in back of the houses, and ran right into the two-year old daughter of the neighbors. She was hit hard, right in the face. Most of her injuries healed up, but she lost one of her eyes and had facial scars that were never totally removable. Both families were devastated. At first, the family of the little girl tried to smooth things over, saying that they knew the boy had not meant to hurt their daughter, saying that they were simply thankful that she was alive and would recover. But as time went on, their anger deepened, a real grudge developed, and they began to avoid their neighbors.

Their neighbors tried to reach out, offering to help pay for medical expenses or to help locate specialists, but each offer was met with the response, "Oh no, we're fine, there's no need." A chasm formed and deepened between the two families, until finally they did not even look at each other even when passing in their yards. One day a huge fence was erected between the two properties. One of the families changed churches, so that they would not have to see the other at church.

Finally, the father of the injured girl decided he had to get even. He started a subtle campaign to undermine the career of his neighbor, manipulating the company books to make it look as though his neighbor had been dishonest, and verbally dropping innuendos to cast doubt on the neighbor's integrity whenever the opportunity arose. Finally, things broke into a crisis, and the neighbor was accused of embezzling from the company. In the course of the investigation, though, the finger was pointed not toward the neighbor, but toward the father of the injured girl. Layer after layer, years of hatred and deception were revealed, and the father of the girl was convicted and sent to jail. His inability to forgive someone else had destroyed his own life.

(Told by Dr. Joan Borysenko, *On the Spiritual Art of Forgiveness* (years ago, on a cassette tape) (edited by FTE)

Few things that God asks of us are more difficult than the demand to forgive. The fact is, we cannot escape God's firm command to forgive others. Every Sunday the forgiveness part of the Lord's Prayer challenges us as we speak it: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."... Jesus wanted us to know that forgiveness is a crucial part of following him. As with all of God's commandments, the call to forgive others has been given to us for our own good. Forgiveness is crucial to having abundant life.

In today's gospel lesson Peter approached Jesus, trying to get Jesus to define the appropriate limits beyond which forgiveness is no longer required. "Lord, how often should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Seven times?"

Give Peter credit, for he was being generous. The prevailing Jewish thought suggested that forgiveness should be extended three times. Three mess-ups, maybe, but on the fourth time, you're out. So Peter was being charitable. But Jesus did not buy it. In essence, he said, "Stop keeping track of wrongs or offenses – smudges. Instead, focus on God's kingdom where there is only forgiveness."

Then he told the story of the servant who owed so much, and was forgiven. I watched while the Gospel lesson was being read today, and NOBODY here seemed surprised when the servant was forgiven that huge debt. We've heard it too many times. Several years ago preacher Thomas Hall tried to reinvigorate the story by having the servant owe a loan shark all that money. The servant borrowed the money, then went to a casino where he got drunk and lost it all in his gambling. "When the hangover wears off, he realizes that he has no way to pay off his debt. The guy probably grovels and says, 'Have patience – I'll pay you back.' Who's he kidding? Repay \$1,000,000? No way! But then, in a burst of pity, the loan shark grants full amnesty-the guy doesn't have to pay even a dollar back." THAT would be a surprise, don't you think? (Thomas Hall, *DPS*, edited by fte)

But then the forgiven servant sees his fellow servant who owes him twenty dollars, and he grabs him by the throat and demands payment NOW. The incredible mercy he had received had not made a dent in how he treated others.

Forgiveness is hard, but it is just as *necessary* as it is hard. It is necessary for our *own* well-being. Somebody said that refusing to forgive someone is like carrying a red-hot brick around with the intention of someday throwing it back at the one who has hurt you. So day after day you carry the brick, which not only burns your hands but it *keeps your hands from holding on to anything worthwhile*. Holding a grudge tires us, burns us. (Source of this concept uncertain)

Smudges, grudges and judges. We are *all* smudged; we're sinners, we make mistakes, we hurt others, we get hurt by others. So there are lots of opportunities for all of us to hold on to grudges and judgments, but doing so keeps us from being able to receive the abundant life Jesus Christ came to give us. Holding grudges and being judgmental both make it impossible for us to do what the Lord has asked us to do: Love God and love your neighbor. Holding grudges and being judgmental keep us from remembering that WE are called to serve God, and that God "wrote the book" on forgiveness, that God is the only One who finally has any right to judge.

We usually hold a grudge when we are upset about ourselves... We usually feel the need to judge when we feel unsure about our own worth... I repeat this story, given by preacher Fred Craddock in his book, *Craddock Stories*. It's about a kitten.

A family is out for a drive on a Sunday afternoon. It is a pleasant afternoon, and they relax at a leisurely pace down the highway. Suddenly, the two children yell, "Daddy! Daddy, stop the car! There's a kitten back there on the side of the road!"

The father doesn't stop. "Daddy, if you don't stop, it will die!"

Finally, the father turns the car around, returns to the spot, and pulls off the road. "You kids stay in the car; I'll see about it." The father goes out to pick up the little kitten, which is just skin and bones, sore-eyes, and full of fleas. When he reaches down to pick it up, with its last bit of energy the kitten bristles, baring tooth and claw with as much hiss as it can muster. The father picks it up by the scruff of its neck, brings it over to the car, and says, "Don't touch it. It's probably got leprosy."

When they get home, the kitten is given several baths, about a gallon of warm milk, and then the children plead: "Can it stay in the house just for tonight? Tomorrow we'll fix it a place in the garage."

...Several weeks pass. The one day the father walks in, feels something rub against his leg, looks down, and there is a cat. He reaches down toward the cat, carefully checking to see that no one is watching. When the cat sees his hand, it does not bare its claws and hiss; instead, it arches its back to receive a caress. Is this the same cat? It's not the same hurt, frightened, hissing kitten on the side of the road. Of course not...and you know what made the difference.

And Craddock continued: "Not long ago, God reached out his hand to bless me and my family. When God did, I looked at that hand; it was covered with scratches. Such is the hand of love, extended to those who are bitter." (*Craddock Stories*, pp. 24-25)

Grudges, judges, and smudges. We've known them, we've lived them, our world is full of them. But no matter how good our reasons, no matter how grievously someone else has hurt us or someone we love, Jesus asks us to let go. Remember the humongous debt WE have been forgiven; remember how the loving hand of God has reached out to us to lift us up and give us hope. We need to make sure that we are not forgetting that we have been asked to do two things: love God, and live our lives showing love to others. God doesn't ask us to judge, only to share the same sort of forgiveness and love that we have been given.

North Korea, ISIS, the tensions over shootings and acquittals in our own cities – It is so easy to get caught up in webs of fear and hatred and pay-back and intimidation...

This Christianity stuff is definitely not for wimps. Jesus hung on the Cross in a mean world and gave up all grudges: "Father, forgive them." As his followers, we are called to gain and share life by daring to do the same. Seventy times seven leads to a lot more life than holding onto grudges and judgments in this smudge-ridden world. By the grace of God, may we find the strength to let go of those things that rob us of life and instead open our hands so that they can reach out to others as we dare to be servants of God.

Lead us, Lord, to life. Amen.