

Debt Free

Preached September 17, 2017

Matthew 18:21-35

Slide: Forgive

There was a movie awhile back about a woman with four daughters, who was very, very bitter and angry. She was bitter and angry because she believed that her husband of many, many years took off with his private secretary to go live in Sweden or some faraway place. After all, she had begun to worry that he was unfaithful to her and this had to be proof. One day, he was in the house. The next day, he was gone, sight unseen, having left her and their four adult daughters without a word.

For years she was angry and bitter to the point that her own daughters were angry and bitter and often didn't want to be around her. The entire family began to hate the man that left them, wondering why he would be so callous as to run off with a woman half his age without caring to tell them what he had done – Until his body is found down

in a nearby well. He had simply gone out for a walk some years ago, had tripped into the well and drowned. He had not run off with a woman. He had not been unfaithful. He had simply died and there was no one there to know.

This movie had a surprise ending, one that left the woman and her four daughters full of guilt and remorse, having wasted all that time being angry at someone for what? Their narrative of what happened kept that narrative of anger going in circles. Never once did they consider that it might have a different ending. The movie ends with the family finally beginning to heal when they have a funeral for their beloved departed husband and father. But, healing would take the form of forgiving themselves for making their own lives painful.

Slide: Woman alone

Couldn't this story really be any of us? How many of us hold on to anger,

bitterness and resentment? A harsh word, instead of being dealt with, blooms into something bigger than it is, feeds upon itself, and grows until you find yourself in a situation where relationships, communities, ethnic groups, and even countries fail to forgive. How can one ever learn to forgive such atrocities as abuse, slavery, let alone just the average every day slights that we hold on to our lives long.

Slide: Forgive as the Lord...

Indeed, it seems Jesus is asking a great deal from us – forgive, have mercy – for I have forgiven you and have mercy on you; therefore, you should do the same in your heart for your neighbor. Is it an ultimatum? What if we can't? Or even more, what if we refuse, instead happy with our need to know we are right to hold on to bitterness?

And yet, I think Jesus knows just how hard forgiveness is for us. I don't think Jesus is being flippant, expecting the impossible from us. Forgiveness does not

ignore the truth of our suffering from hurt. Forgiveness is not weak. Rather, our Lord knows that it takes courage, integrity, and work to forgive, that it isn't just some simple thing to let go of being hurt.

But, like anything good that takes time to work on, Jesus essentially tells Peter, who thinks that forgiveness need only happen so often, that rather forgiveness is not only what God does, forgiveness is a practice, and that practice is about and for you, not about the one to whom you forgive. Forgiving someone seventy times seven may mean a constant practicing of it over and over until such a time comes that you finally have become free and find peace. Forgiving frees you even when it doesn't free the other one who harms.

Slide: hands and flower

Practicing forgiveness is a journey that takes time, sometimes seventy times seven times before we finally have the peace we receive from past hurts. To not

practice forgiveness leads us to be trapped in a cycle of anger, bitterness, and resentment, a prison of our own making, not unlike the one Jesus describes in this Gospel reading from Matthew. The outer darkness, the place of gnashing our teeth, that place is one for which we don't need God to create for us. We are plenty capable of creating it for ourselves. Just take a moment to remember someone hurting you and you can feel it in your body - the tensing, the anxiety, the circling thoughts and past judgements. They all flood into view often difficult to sit with. No wonder resentment is easier than forgiveness.

Slide: Practice Mindfulness

This summer, as you know, I was on Sabbatical. And, during that Sabbatical, I took a seven week course on Mindfulness practices. If you are unaware of what the study of Mindfulness is, **Mindfulness** is the basic human ability to be fully in the present moment, aware of where we are and what we're

doing, and refraining as best we can from being overly judgmental, reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us.

So, being mindful means that you pay more attention to how your emotions, thoughts, and bodily sensations affect you so that you can better find ways to live more fully with intention, gratitude, and positivity. And, it is an amazing practice to think that just by being quiet for five, ten, fifteen minutes a day can have such an effect upon how you view negative and positive experiences. More importantly, mindfulness helps a person to see just how much time we spend feeding our inner dialog of negativity.

Slide: White and black dot

Let me use an example. If I were to show you this slide, what would be your focus? What is the prominent feature of this slide? Just look at it and what grabs your eye? If you are like me, it's likely that you would say the focus of this slide is the black dot in the middle. And yet, that

black dot is little in comparison to what is around it. It isn't as big as the white around it. So, why be focused on the small black dot?

Slide: Think Negative

Negativity is like that. In our lives, we tend to focus on the small little negative things in our day rather than looking at the giant goodness that is around it. This is natural with human beings as it pertains to our tendency towards our nature. We tend to make the black dot, the pain, hurt, and negative things more important, even though the goodness of God is the white, big piece around it. Mindfulness, contemplative prayer, helps us to see that we do a great deal of harm to our own selves often more than others do to us.

Slide: Forgive us as...

One of the weeks of the Mindfulness class I took was on the subject of forgiveness and about how hard it is to forgive others if we can't first know that we are forgiven; that is, to forgive yourself

because God already has. I think there is something major to that and to how we are to walk as free Christians in this world.

Here in just this story alone, Jesus is offering us just that: a debt free life, one where we are forgiven and yet, I think we walk through life feeling that we aren't. We may intuitively know that Jesus forgives us but it's hard for ourselves to believe it. Do you truly know you are a forgiven person? Are you able to look into your own past hurts and sins and know that you are debt free?

Slide: You are forgiven

The practice of forgiving others begins with fully being aware that YOU are debt free, that you are forgiven first. Only then can you truly work on forgiving others who hurt you. Of course, it doesn't mean that you don't take responsibility for your sin and that others around you aren't expected to, but confession and forgiveness are two different things. Forgiveness is often the harder of the two.

Today, sitting here, I know there are some things from your past that stir up, which show you and me that this is true. Deep down, maybe we aren't sure we are forgiven. And, if we don't fully feel forgiven, whether it is for general reasons or for specific ones, how can you begin to forgive others?

Therefore, brothers and sisters, for my first words to you as I come back from this summer, I want to declare this to you: you are debt free. Jesus has made you so. But, do you really believe it? Are you able to see beyond your sin that you are worthy of forgiveness because Christ has done it for you; for you ARE worthy according to Christ. He would not have died for you if he did not think so. And, if Jesus has made you debt free, than know it deep inside, so that you may begin to forgive that brother or sister you know in your heart needs your forgiveness – even if you need to do it more than seventy times seven.

We will take just a brief moment of about thirty

seconds in silence to contemplate God's forgiveness for you and then finish this sermon time with confession and absolution.

Slide: Hold final slide until Pastor Christine stands for confession.

(A time of silence is observed.)

(The confession is said followed by the sermon hymn.)