

Freedom
Matthew 18:21-35
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, September 14, 2008

Winston Churchill, a Conservative member of Parliament, was assigned a banquet seat next to his biggest critic, Lady Astor, a Liberal member of Parliament. Social convention dictated dinner partners behave graciously even if they couldn't stand each other. Poor Lady Astor tried her best, but Winston was at his best being passively obnoxious. Finally she couldn't take it any more saying, "Winston, if I was your wife, I'd poison your tea." Churchill replied, "Madam, if I was your husband, I'd drink it."

Someone once said hell is like a huge banquet table burdened with food, but everybody's starving because their forks are too long to put food in their mouths. Simultaneously heaven is also a banquet, but the people around the table are well fed even though their forks are too long, because everybody is feeding each other.

Not being able to forgive is like starving yourself. You can't eat because your belly is saturated with anger and resentment. Not willing to forgive and forget we nurture our grudges and hurl insults, that may bring instant gratification, but never a permanent resolution.

There was once a man, who went to church every Sunday, sang the hymns and listened intently to the sermon, but never prayed the Lord's Prayer. When asked why he answered, "Because there's that one line 'forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors'." It dawned on him being forgiven is strongly linked to forgiving and he wasn't about to do that!

Theoretically forgiveness is a fine virtue, until you find yourself having to forgive someone, especially the offender who hurt not only you but your family. Your anger and resentment can become like a festering wound that mutates into a toxic badge of honor. And forgiveness is especially hard, if the offender doesn't feel he needs to be forgiven. How can you possibly forgive someone who refuses to acknowledge wrong doing?

Well, consider this, what if Jesus, suffering on the cross, refused to forgive. What if he let anger and resentment boil over and instead of praying, "Father forgive them," instead prayed, "Father, damn them all to hell?"

You might be tempted to answer, "Well, I'm not the Son of God, so don't expect me to be that perfect. I've been terribly hurt, my life is in a shambles, I don't have it in me to forgive like that."

Maybe this was Peter's attitude when asking Jesus, "Lord, if a member of the Church sins against you, how many times must I forgive him, seven times?"

This wasn't a theoretical question. Very likely someone hurt Peter repeatedly, maybe seven times, so he wanted Jesus to set a limit on forgiveness, after all repeat offenders can bleed you dry.

But Jesus refused to let Peter off the hook. "Not seven times, but seventy times seven times!" Apparently forgiveness is not an option in the Kingdom of God.

Probably Jesus could tell Peter wasn't buying it, so he told a parable, an earthly story with a heavenly meaning to explain why forgiving is essential.

A royal steward owed his king a ton of money, 10,000 talents the equivalent of fifteen years wages. This official begged his king to forgive the debt, not only for his sake, but for his wife and children as well. The king, to the steward's shock and delight, showed extraordinary grace and completely forgave the debt.

Soon afterward an underling approached our steward and begged him to forgive his debt, astronomically less than the steward's debt to the king. Unfortunately the steward squandered the opportunity to be gracious and threw the poor man into prison. When the king got word of this injustice he had the steward hauled before him and demanded, "Should you not have shown mercy to your fellow slave as I had shown to you?" Then the king handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

Then the punch line. Jesus said, "So my heavenly father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother and sister from your heart."

Let me tell a story on myself. There was one time in particular when I was not ready to forgive, because I was intentionally and deeply wounded by someone who should have known better. I couldn't let go of my resentment until a clergy friend told me, "Harry, you have to let go of it or it will take you over." Intellectually I knew he was right, but emotionally it seemed unreasonable. I asked, "What would you do if you were in my place." He said, "Start praying for so-and-so and God will heal you."

Now this fellow who hurt me never asked for forgiveness, in fact, he'd probably deny he did anything wrong, which made it harder for me to forgive. But I took my friend's advice and forced myself to lift up my offender in prayer and ask God to heal me so I could let go and move on. And you know what, it worked! My consuming resentment slowly dissipated and I came to a point where forgiveness was possible. It took a long time, but as they say, "the journey is just as important as the destination."

Now, in case you haven't figured it out there are several practical reasons why Jesus is so adamant about "forgiving as you have been forgiven." The first reason has already been identified. If you never forgive you'll become consumed by resentment and anger. There's an old saying: "Refusing to forgive is like eating rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die." Not forgiving results in poisoning yourself.

But there's another reason. God wants us to be reconciled to one another; he wants us to be in community, with no one left out. That's why Jesus insisted on including forgiveness in the discipleship lifestyle. How can we expect forgiveness for the hurtful things we've done if we aren't willing to go and do likewise? When you think about it, forgiveness is in itself a ministry of the Church, because when we forgive, the other can experience liberation and redemption that can be traced back to the love and grace of God.

Remember a time when you wronged someone, causing your relationship to be broken and your heart to be heavy with guilt and the fear of being cut off and lost. But then you heard those wonderful words, "I forgive you." Immediately your body, mind and spirit were released from your self-inflicted pain and your friendship was restored. Well the one who forgave you ministered to you and helped you experience grace and healing. So, go and do likewise, pass it on as you let the presence of Christ empower you to love God, yourself and your neighbor. Again, Christianity is all about taking care of all your relationships, even with your enemy.

The second reason why forgiving is good for you is because whenever you forgive your neighbor you obey God's will for your life. Obedience is an essential part

of the discipleship lifestyle. Like Jesus, we need to place ourselves under God's sovereign authority. Think for a minute what your life would be like if nobody ever forgave anybody. Our homes, workplaces and churches would be littered with broken relationships. We'd all be lonely and heartbroken. There'd be no hope for community, life together as human beings and brothers and sisters in Christ. Our world would be even more dysfunctional than it is now. Nor would there be any chance of reconciliation and forgiveness with God. We'd all be hopelessly lost.

The parable of the unjust steward is hard but necessary to hear. Saying that one phrase in the Lord's Prayer, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," is hard but necessary to say. Putting it into practice is sometimes near impossible. And yet time and again it's all been done, only because God makes forgiveness possible. His love conquers all, if you let it.

Next time you find it impossible to forgive, remember Jesus, who said to his disciples, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you." (John 13:15) And then pray for healing for yourself and the power to forgive. It's this type of prayer Jesus had in mind when he taught "ask and it will be given to you."

Forgiveness: good for your soul and your relationships with God and your neighbor.