

Pentecost 18
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Desmond Tutu wrote, "To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self interest." How profound is the need to be forgiven and to forgive. You feel it. We all do from time to time. You need the freedom of forgiveness and forgiving. Forgiveness is needed for relationships to continue and grow. Forgiveness is needed for personal enhancement and health.

"Forgiveness is more than a moral imperative, more than a theological dictum. It is the only means, given our humanness and imperfections, to overcome hate and condemnation, and proceed with the business of growing and loving," writes psychologist Paul Coleman.

Jesus is greatly concerned about forgiveness. There is no freedom in resentment, hatred, holding a grudge. That is why in Scripture Jesus says quite a bit about forgiveness.

In the Gospel for today Peter asks Jesus a very important question. "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?" Peter thought he was being very generous, "Should I forgive as much as seven times?" Jesus response in the translation we are reading is "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times." Other translations say, "seventy times seven."

Peter knew that the orthodox thought on the matter was that a person was to forgive three times. What he wanted from Jesus was some kind of formula. "Jesus, what can I do to fulfill my obligation to God to forgive as God forgives me and fulfill my moral obligation to forgive my neighbor?" Peter thinks that seven is a very generous offer. Jesus comes back with an answer that appears over the top.

Whether it is seventy seven times of 490 times, you do the math seventy times seven, how in the world can one keep track of that? Well, at least we now know what God expects of us. We know when we can stop forgiving, when we have gone far enough. Hold on though. Jesus uses the number for infinity - in other words, Jesus says there are no limits to the times you forgive for God has set no limits on forgiving you. Wait a minute, Jesus.

I am to forgive over and over when a person continues to cause me hurt, isn't that self defeating? Jesus responds, "Yes, forgive. Forgive and make an effort to work with that person to grow your relationship to the point where you do not hurt one another."

The interesting factor in forgiveness is that it not only does something for the one forgiven, but it does something also for the person who is doing the forgiving. Forgiveness is freeing.

Jesus goes on to illustrate what he is saying with a parable. It is the story about a servant who owed his master a great deal of money. Ten thousand talents was about fifteen year's wages. The man pleaded with the master to have patience with him and he would repay all that he owed. The master of the slave agreed and forgave his debt.

The forgiven servant then collars a fellow servant who owes him one hundred denarii, about one day's wages. When the fellow servant asks the forgiven servant to be patient with him and promises he will repay the debt in full, the recently forgiven servant refuses to pass on the grace extended to him.

The forgiven servant has his fellow servant thrown in prison. The master learns of this vindictive act and reneges on his promise of forgiveness, having the first servant handed over to the tormentors. Jesus completes this parable with this pointed theological application, "So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Forgiveness is not passive resignation to a bad situation. Forgiveness is a positive, joyful activity in which we change from seeing ourselves as victims to becoming victors. Forgiveness enables us to move from weakness to strength, from inadequacy to self affirmation. We need to forgive. We need to apologize and change our ways. We need to clear the air and allow others to do the same. We need to forgive in order to be forgiven.

There are times when we just need to let go of the past. We need to break free and get on with life. We need to release ourselves and others from the burden of guilt and pain for past actions or words. It takes two to reconcile but one to forgive. This is not just excusing an action. This is not just ignoring a wrong, a sin committed. This is not allowing another to act irresponsibly. Forgiving another is setting yourself free from the burden that weighs you down and prohibits you from growing as the loving person God created you to be.

Over the years I have seen so many wonderful people be dragged down into despair over what another person has done. They just hold on to the anger, not knowing what to do with it, they wallow in their pain. Forgive! Let it go. Take back the God given power you have over your life. Forgiveness is not weakness. It is claiming the power you have. Forgiveness is healthy. It is freeing.

In forgiving people are not being asked to forget. On the contrary, it is important to remember so the atrocities of the past and not repeat them. Forgiveness does not mean condoning what has been done. It means taking what has been done seriously. It means drawing out the sting that threatens our very existence.

There is a story told about an old man who when asked to pray always used the same prayer, "Lord, prop us on our leaning side."

One day someone asked him why he always used the same prayer.

"Well you see it is like this," he said. "I got this old barn.

It's been out back a long time, gone through lots of storms, stood for many a year. It's still standing. One day I noticed it was leaning a bit to one side. So I went and got some strong poles and propped it on it's leaning side so that it does not fall over.

Then I got to thinking. I've been around a long time. I've withstood some bad weather in my life. I've had some hard times but I'm still here. So, I ask the Lord to prop me up on my leaning side. The way I see it, a lot of us are leaning from time to time. Sometimes we get to leaning toward anger, toward hatred, leaning toward bitterness, leaning toward cussing, leaning toward a lot of things we shouldn't.

So we need to pray. We need to ask God to prop us up on our leaning side. We need to let go of those things pushing us over and forgive. Forgive so we can stand up tall and straight again to glorify God."

So be it, Lord, prop us up on our leaning side! Amen