

“Forgiveness and Love”

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Let us pray.

Oh Lord, may the words from my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight. Amen.

We use, on a regular basis, the concept of forgiveness. Earlier today, we said the Lord’s Prayer containing the phrase “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Have you ever stopped to think what this means?

In the Gospel According to John there is a story about the woman caught in adultery. She was brought before Jesus at the temple. Punishment according to the Law of Moses was being stoned. Jesus made a simple statement to the crowd, “Let anyone who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” The crowd gradually dispersed until just the woman and Jesus were left together. The crowd could not condemn her. And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

Jesus had made a statement to the woman and to us. I wonder if the woman had any idea who was forgiving her. Perhaps she had heard Jesus teach, perhaps had even seen him heal someone. We don’t know. But what we do know is that Jesus extended forgiveness to her. Did she know that she was being forgiven by the only one who knows the ultimate tragedy of human sin and is able therefore to extend true forgiveness? Whether or not she knew is unimportant. We know when we are privileged to accept forgiveness from our Lord.

I can’t resist telling you a short story about forgiveness. Once again, I was a precocious kid. This time I was a little older – eleven years old. I had just been confirmed into the Methodist Church (This is before the merger with the Evangelical United Brethern Church) and something terrible happened at our church. The pastor and a woman from the choir were caught having an affair. This was the same pastor whom I loved so much and asked my hard questions about God. Anyway, the pastor was dismissed from his duties and basically run out of town. Being young and still very idealistic I had no idea of just how serious an affair was, let alone what it was. All I knew was that my pastor was no longer with the church. Having been taught forgiveness and love all of my life, I simply could not understand the lack of forgiveness. All I can say today is “Ah, the joys and ignorance of children!”

In our Scripture this morning, the psalmist, in need of forgiveness, demonstrates reliance and trust in the Lord, and receives His assurance of forgiveness. I wonder if this is our understanding of being forgiven. Is our trust in the Lord as strong?

Being able to forgive one another should make the great difference between life in the church and in our outside lives. It may happen that people offend or hurt one another. But this cannot be unresolved; it must be settled through loving forgiveness. This is not always easy. The pain of offense is real and not easily overcome. Forgiveness does not mean to take things lightly. But the door can open for forgiveness and reconciliation. However, before we can be the light we must see the light. God's light saves, heals, cleanses, and restores us despite our sometimes being separated from Him.

We talked about John Wesley last week, and I'm going to add a little more.

Do you feel guilty when you do something that you know is wrong, or could potentially harm someone? What do you do? Sit and stew over it? There is a better way. Sincerely pray and turn your problem to God. God will forgive. Then your guilt is removed. You may remember your action with remorse, but you are forgiven. God loves us and will forgive that which we offer in prayer.

What about when your sin is over another an action or words to another person? While it seems obvious, it is difficult. You must humbly go to the person and ask forgiveness. And hopefully they will accept your words.

Forgiveness is at the heart of the Wesleyan order of salvation, and there is no book but the Bible that teaches God completely forgives our sin. In pardoning our wrongdoings, God absolves us from the condemnation of the law and removes the guilt of sin such that those who receive forgiveness are marked by both freedom and peace.

In a world of disrupted relationships, forgiveness is necessary in order to go forward and in order to have hope for the future.

John Wesley called love God's reigning attribute. To love is to promote well-being, and biblical writers often call this the establishment of peace or blessedness. God's love is unique in its relentless loyalty to promote well-being. While a person's love may last for only a short time, God's steadfast love never fails. This is important. God's steadfast love never fails.

An important part of love is forgiveness. To forgive is to choose to affirm the well-being of those who have committed offense. However, forgiveness does not mean

ignoring the harm that has been caused. But it does involve choosing to love, with God's help.

All or nearly all families have their skeleton in the closet. I certainly do. But do you let it eat away at you, harming your spirit and sense of peace? Sometimes it is best to forgive in the absence of the other party. Then the issue can be resolved in your own heart and peace may be restored for you. You remember the action, but you have forgiven and again can find God's love in them. And, you are at peace with yourself. Remember, the Lord's steadfast love endures forever.

John Wesley's says loving one another is a never-ending Christian obligation. It is also the essence of Christian ethics and behavior. When we avoid violating a particular law, the letter of the law is observed. But when we love one another, the underlying spirit of the law is fulfilled. How much the two statements differ in practice. What I hear is that obeying the law without a heart filled with spirit is missing the point.

I'm going to refer to the Gospel According to John again. Jesus links loving him to obeying what he commands, so that love is the only law in our relationships—with oneself, with neighbors, with enemies, with creation, and with God. In practice, it means promoting the highest good of others and not causing harm. Listen to the Scriptures:

If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

and

They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me: and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.

Forgiveness is clearly tied to God's love. And it is not just a New Testament concept. In the book of Isaiah, written about 742 BCE, a paraphrase of a passage is that God always acts to redeem and rescue us. We can't outrun, outgive, outlast or outgrow God's love. The whole of Scripture captures God's great love affair with humanity. We may try to run and hide, but the arm of God's love for us is always long enough to reach and rescue us.

I have two favorite passages about loving God. One is before Christ was born, found in the Book of Deuteronomy. I cannot give you an accurate date of its being written – I believe it is a span of 700 years, from 700 BCE to 1400 BCE. But it really doesn't matter. What matters is the Scripture itself, called the Schema:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The second passage, from our New Testament Gospel According to Matthew:

He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Both passages contain key words about love – the love for God and neighbor. God loved us first; an expression of God's grace, and our response is to love God. This is amazing! The two passages were written at least 700 years apart and God is steadfast in his command to love God first.

Many of you have read Mitch Albom's book, *Tuesday's with Morrie*. The book was riveting for me. While reading it, I found myself questioning my own priorities. For example, in the book it says the most important thing in life is to give out love and let it come in. Love is the only rational act. He also points out that the ultimate questions have to do with love, responsibility, spirituality and awareness. I find that Mitch Albom struggles with the same questions we do about forgiveness and love. But most of all, he is missing God in his life!

Let us remember that if we love Jesus, we will keep his commandments. When in need of forgiveness, rely and trust in the Lord.

Amen.