

Sermon September 13th, 2020

God is Gracious and Merciful

For many of us we remember summers past where we went to some outdoor camp, whether it was a bible camp or a sports camp or a music camp or an art camp or some other camp. We remember all the fun activities we did. We remember the friendships we made. We may also remember the rival cabin, and the children we used to prank back and forth with. I think of the movie “The Parent Trap” where twin girls who were separated as babies meet at a camp, after being exiled to a cabin together, for continuously pranking each other.

From a very young age we develop this nasty thing called pride that drives us to want to get even with someone whenever they try to hurt us. For example, when someone breaks up with you, isn't there that little part of yourself where you hope they spend the rest of their lives regretting their decision. Pining over you. On their knees in a dark room screaming for relief.

Or someone zings you with a good timing joke in front of your peers, and you find yourself doing anything to try and get in a situation where you can zing them back. There is a “Seinfeld” episode where George gets zinged at a work meeting, and spends the rest of the episode trying to get this guy back with a joke of his own. Let's just say it doesn't end well for George.

Or someone cuts you off, and so, you decide to race ahead of them, and cut them off too. One of my high school friends did this way too often, and one time when I wasn't with him (thank God), it backfired. This car followed him after the retaliation cut off, and when stopped at a red light, the people in the car got out and punched right through his driver's side window. Trying to pull him out. Luckily, he got away.

We spend too much energy trying to get even with people who hurt us instead of forgiving them. Letting go of the prideful anger within us. So, we can move on with our lives.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus talks a lot about the importance of forgiveness. In today's gospel, we hear that Peter needs some clarification on how often one should forgive before getting the chance to get even. “What if someone bugs me over and over again Jesus? Am I still to forgive them? Can't I settle the score?” Peter pleads with Jesus. Maybe there is someone in the group following Jesus that is just getting on Peter's nerves. Maybe he even has some plot about how to get even.

Whatever Peter's motive is, what Jesus says in response to Peter is challenging for us to hear, and to follow. Jesus says we should forgive over and over again. Even seventy-seven times. A lot of scholars see this text in parallel to a text in the Old

Testament that talks about someone getting vengeance seventy-seven times. When we read these two texts together, what Jesus is saying to Peter is that we need to forgive all the time.

I think we can all agree that Jesus is asking a lot from us here. How many of us are holding on to some residual anger from a broken relationship? How many of us have trouble letting go of past hurts?

In our Genesis reading today, we see a good example of someone letting go of his need to get even with his brothers, offering forgiveness over revenge. Joseph was treated horribly by his brothers when he was younger. And now, Joseph is in a position of authority where he has the means to get even. Instead, he chooses to forgive, to let go of any anger he might have been feeling, and focus on the redemption God breathed into his life as he faced suffering at the hands of his brothers. Joseph's ability to let go and move on was liberating for Joseph. It opened his eyes to see the redemptive work God was doing in his life. It empowered him to become a caring and generous leader.

Forgiveness is good for us, because it helps us let go of the anger that can build up inside of us when we hold on to that need to get even. Like plaque on teeth when we don't brush enough. Jesus doesn't want us to carry that heavy burden. One reason for this is it gets in the way of our ability to love others like Jesus does. To be the people God created us to be.

So, Jesus invites us to forgive. To let go of that need to get even. To brush our teeth regularly. To wish the person well. Even when they are unable to say "I'm sorry." Now, if there isn't repentance, which Peter is getting at in his question, it doesn't mean you need to keep tolerating the abuse or mistreatment from this person. It means you need to let go of that need to get even. That need to see something bad happen to them.

Forgiveness doesn't always lead to reconciliation, which baffles people's minds. They see forgiveness and reconciliation going hand in hand. But sometimes reconciliation isn't possible, because not everyone is sorry for the bad things, they do to us. Yet, you can still forgive. You can still stop being angry at the person. You can wish them well, as you safely separate yourself from the person.

Jesus wants what is best for us, and that is to let go of the anger. To safely separate ourselves from the abusive person, and move on. To pray for them to heal, and move on. To be able to love others with this same grace as God loves us.

Jesus goes on to share a parable about how merciful God is to us. God could hold on to all the things we do or don't do that disappoint God. God could let the anger fester and decide one day to pull the plug on this whole human operation. But God doesn't do

this. God sends Jesus into our lives to show us just how far God's mercy stretches to catch us when we fall.

God forgives us day and day out even when we neglect to say sorry. That is what is so mind boggling for us to understand. What justice is in God's eyes is so different from us. Judgment doesn't mean revenge or getting even. God's justice is so different than we can ever imagine.

God forgives us the enormous debt we carry with us, and invites us to forgive others in this same way. To love our neighbour in this same way.

Sometimes we will struggle to love the people who hurt us. Sometimes we will struggle to forgive. Sometimes we need to forgive that person day after day in our hearts, so to, let go of the anger inside us. Forgiveness is a patient process. As Gandhi once said, forgiveness isn't for the weak but for the strong. It takes a lot of effort for us to forgive.

And yet, how freeing is it when we are able to forgive and move on with our lives? To not be dictated by our need for revenge, but by the gracious love of God through Christ Jesus. Empowered by this love to love others with this same grace.

Let us pray, gracious God, thank you for forgiving us for our many faults. Empower us through this forgiveness to forgive others who wrong us. Open our hearts to love as you love, so that we can live in the presence of your kingdom. A kingdom built on your forgiving love, not our violent need to get even. **Amen.**

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