Christ Church UCC, Annville PA

September 6, 2020

Pastor Tony Fields

Service Prayers/ Stranger in my house

Forgiveness Again

Matthew 18: 21 -35

A Stranger in My House (House of Worship)

Happy New Year! It is Rally Sunday, and we were looking forward to worshipping together with St John’s UCC, our sister church. However, that is on hold right now. Rally time is when the church gathers. It's the beginning of our church year, a time of gathering from time of separation, summer vacations, summer activities, especially the experience of the pandemic, and wrestling with the cries of racial justice, racial discrimination, racial reconciliation, and civil unrest.

However, do you not find it interesting that our liturgical calendar talks about Forgiveness. The church and community are gathering and talking about forgiveness and not hope or victory, but forgiveness. Therefore, what do you think God is trying to tell us as we live within the community and gather back as the church, faithful people? Perhaps Forgiveness is at the core of Christianity. Forgiveness is a necessary part of ongoing communal relationship. (Rolf Jacobson) Not retaliation, not revenge, not vengeance; however, living in harmony with each other. The songwriter states they will know we are Christians by our love.

As I read the scriptures before us and think about life’s current situation, I cannot wonder what parable will Jesus tell us this day in time? Then again, as I read and think on our scripture readings, sisters and brothers, rest assured that God is still speaking. Yes, I am interested in discerning how to live awake and rejuvenated in our society by understanding the gospel while it inspires hope within the life of the church, community, and society for which we live.

Forgiveness is now a daily thought because, during this time, we saw ourselves and fellow members in a different way. Let us be honest. We are surprised how Christians responded in these challenging times. We thought we knew our neighbors that we worship with only to find out they are just as different as our changing communities. You know not only culturally, racially, theologically, but our society is also changing; however, the member I worship with is much different. I mean, since we go through the same church and worship in the same building how do we now walk and work together unless we agree. Wait you are a stranger in my pew. I was not expecting this behavior from you. Forgiveness is part of identity because did not Christ forgive us? I mean during our worship hour do we not ask God's forgiveness in our worship? We are asking God to erase our sins and unfaithfulness. Even in our passing of the peace it is just not saying “hi” to each other but a reconciliation of uniting with each other. And yes, the church is experiencing polarization. Possibly God knows exactly what He is doing by giving us a relevant word to speak to our hearts.

As we gather back as the church and move into our way of being, let us think about this question: Think of settings when you found it easy and hard to forgive, what are the factors?

Here the biblical stories become difficult to hear. Forgiveness is hard yet necessary.

The disciple asks Jesus how often we should forgive. The response is seven times seventy. The number of times is not the qualifier; the act of forgiving is the answer. Yes, forgiving repeatedly is required for the community and our ourselves. Peter asks Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" And Jesus expands his vision to see how miserly Peter’s concept of forgiveness is.

Joseph’s brothers beg him for forgiveness after their father Jacob dies, afraid that he will take revenge against them for their sin of selling him into slavery so many years before.

And the psalmist extols the God of Israel, “who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit.”

Forgiveness is hard. We who have suffered know that. It is much easier to be angry, to nurse a grudge. There is something satisfying about reciting to yourself or to others the grievances, big and small, that justify your righteous anger.

And there is always fuel for that fire of anger and bitterness. The politics of the workplace (even in churches) and the nature of human community lead to injustices and offenses, sometimes intentional, sometimes not. Intentional or not, we hurt other people and we ourselves get hurt. It would be great if it were just me and Jesus, but I have to deal with you and you have to deal with me, and again, it is difficult to forgive.

But that is exactly what Jesus calls us to do in today’s Gospel reading. We are to forgive those who sin against us. We are to forgive as God has forgiven us. Our lives are to reflect the nature of the God we worship, a God who is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Psalm 103:8).

Now, there are some important caveats to make. First, forgiveness is not license for continued injustice, abuse, or oppression. An unrepentant sinner (or an unjust system) cannot be allowed to continue to harm others. There is need for repentance and reform in many societal systems and in our own lives.

Also, forgiveness does not erase outcomes. Forgiveness may heal a bond, but it does not erase all the consequences of sin.

Nevertheless, forgiveness is at the core of our call to Christian discipleship. It is at the core of the Christian Gospel itself. The Gospel is not simply “God loves everyone.” (Though that is true, it is too simplistic an understanding of the Gospel.) The Gospel is “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” And “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (2 Corinthians 5:17, 19). The Gospel is “For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:11-12).

So, as witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we proclaim not just that God loves, but that in Christ, God forgives and reconciles and makes new. And we live that out in our lives by forgiving those who have sinned against us.

Forgiveness is not an emotion. Forgiveness is an act of willpower, and power will function regardless of the temperature of the heart.

The good news is that where God calls, God also equips. God gives us in Christ the gift of forgiveness and helps us to share that gift with others.

My wrestle is why will the owner entrusts all these talents with the servant. His lack of judgment will cause the servant a lifetime imprisonment. He should know the servant could not pay the debt and this did not just affect him, but this will be passed to his family.

The parable informs us how one is forgiven and neglect to forgive others. Ancient currency to modern – matters to draw out Jesus’ point. 130 lbs. of silver would take a laborer about fifteen years to earn. Which means that the servant owed the king about 150,000 years of labor! In other words, he would never, ever be able to pay this debt back. A denarius, by comparison, was worth about a day’s wage, which meant that the second servant owed the first about a hundred days of labor – no small debt. The parable closes gloomily, as the unforgiving servant is handed over for punishment until he pays and Jesus warns that we, too, must forgive others or face the consequences.

Let us look at three phases of forgiveness: forgive, reconcile, restore. Encouraging abuse victims to forgive so that their abusers do not live “rent free” in their heads does not require them to reconcile with them or restore them to their prior station. It is also important for victims to hear that their abusers have NO right to demand forgiveness – it is a gift and will come when it is time for it to come. The mercy forgiveness brings is often to the one doing the forgiving rather than the one who caused the offense.

What forgiveness does is it lays a new foundation for the relationship that emerges from the seeds it plants. Perhaps forgiveness is hard because we are not God; however, we carry the gift of God’s image.

• The king’s role in all this is foolish; he is not without accountability.

• Forgiveness is not revocable - either you forgive or not

• Forgive without keeping score