

“Faith, Family & Forgiveness...Or Not”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, GA

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 17, 2017

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Holy Scriptures: Matthew 18: 21-35 Romans 14: 1-12

Matthew 18:21-35 (NRSV)

²¹Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²²Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

²³“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Romans 14:1-12 (NRSV)

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. ²Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. ⁴Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

⁵Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. ⁶Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also, those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

⁷We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰ Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹ For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." ¹² So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Notes on the text:

The Apostle Paul grew into his relationship with Jesus Christ only after many years of persecuting and judging people with whom he differed. If anyone understood the damage that comes from being an abuser and victim of harsh judgment, it was Paul. We overhear him saying to Christians in Rome, "Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand." (Romans 14: 4)

Today's Epistle lesson could have come from this morning's news reports. The Apostle Paul speaks of the dangers of self-righteousness and the overwhelming temptation many feel to make their own convictions the standard by which to judge other people. We witness attitudes like this every day, from the political realm to the business world to how we treat our neighbors next door and across the tracks and across the pews. Paul warns us that we are in danger. Beware of allowing your convictions, the self-proclaimed rightness of your beliefs and behaviors, to disrupt the creation of true community.

Let us confess publicly and privately our temptations and tendencies to set ourselves up as judge and jury over one another. Let us commit our hearts and habits to be guided down gentler, kinder paths of righteousness. Let us covenant to seek and sustain Christ's ways of building community.

Sermon

Would you rather be right or reconciled?

Would you like some time to think about it?!

In his work called An African Prayer Book,

Desmond Tutu tells us that "a [gentleman] had a particular besetting sin, and he used to confess it, and God would forgive him.

...No sooner had he been absolved then he would trip up and sin again.

*One day this happened and he rushed back to God and said,
'I'm sorry, I've done it again.'*

And God said, 'What have you done again?'"

Desmond Tutu observes: "God suffers from amnesia when it comes to our sins.

God does not look at the caterpillar we are now,

but at the dazzling butterfly we have in us to become.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus bids us to ask God to forgive us

as we forgive those who have wronged us.

Not to forgive others is to shut the door to our own being forgiven."

(Desmond Tutu, An African Prayer Book, 1995, P.38)

Desmond Tutu, the Lord's Prayer, the Holy Scriptures, and your own beautiful faith
point you toward the incredible, amazing truth
that God forgives and forgets our repented sins.

When it comes to our confessed sins,

the amnesia of God is a spiritual attribute
we are encouraged to claim...and emulate.

God covenants with us to not hold our confessed sins against us.

Accepting this as a starting point is the easy part.

Here is the hard part, my friends.

Here is the part that makes us uncomfortable and afflicts our consciences:

As God has forgiven us, so we are to practice forgiveness with one another.

Would you rather be right or reconciled?

A little boy named Kwami was having trouble with a playmate.

One day in Sunday School he heard the story of Jesus' conversation with Peter,

the day Peter asked that excellent question,
*"Lord, if another member of the church sins against me,
how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"*

It seemed to both Peter and Kwami as if seven times was an astronomical amount.

Jesus said to Peter, *"Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."*

So the next time Kwami saw his playmate, he said,

“Buddy, I’ll forgive you 77 times, but after that you are in trouble!”

(adapted from Lectionaid)

We may smile, yet this serves to remind us of our very real human tendency

to put limits on things that Jesus teaches are infinite and boundless.

We draw lines in the sand and say, *“I will love you thus far but no farther!”*

The Lord we serve erases the lines we draw, and says, in effect,

“I will love you forever, and I will lay down my life for you.”

Would you rather be right or reconciled?

Through the example of Jesus Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit,

God offers us not only the gift of being forgiven,
but also the grace to give such a gift to one another.

We are blessed to receive from the Spirit of God

a clean slate with which to start each day anew.

At the same time, we are blessed to be able to extend to one another a clean slate
and to say, *“I am praying for you, and I forgive you.”*

Disciples of Jesus Christ have this divine power.

Jesus told us,

*“Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven,
and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”*

He also said, *“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven.”*

What power you have!

We have the power to forgive...and to forget.

We do need to remember and learn from our histories,

gleaning wisdom and experience,
yet we are called to do so without feeding the grudges

and desire for revenge
that pulls us back into a painful past and a lost future.

You know, forgiveness is not saying the offense never happened.

It did.

Forgiveness is not saying that everything is okay.

It isn't.

Forgiveness is not saying that we never feel the pain of being wronged.

We do.

Forgiveness is an attitude; it is a way to approach life;

it is our greatest challenge and our mightiest joy in the practice of our faith.

Would you rather be right or reconciled?

Anne Lamott said in her book, Travelling Mercies (page 128):

"I went around saying for a long time

I am not one of those Christians who are heavy into forgiveness

-- that I am one of the other kind.

But even though it was funny, and actually true,

it started to be too painful to stay this way.

They say we are not punished for the sin but by the sin,

and I began to feel punished for my unwillingness to forgive.

By the time I decided to become one of the ones who is heavily into forgiveness,

*it was like trying to become a marathon runner in middle age;
everything inside me either recoiled, as from a hot flame,
or laughed a little too hysterically."*

She figured out how painful it is to not forgive,

that holding on to your anger and pain
is like drinking poison and expecting someone else to get sick.

We get a glimpse into Anne Lamott's spiritual maturation when she said in a recent interview:

"I think joy and sweetness and affection are a spiritual path.

*We're here to know God,
to love and serve God,
and to be blown away by the beauty and miracle of nature.*

*You just have to get rid of so much baggage
to be light enough to dance, to sing, to play.
You don't have time to carry grudges;
you don't have time to cling to the need to be right."*
(Anne Lamott interview in The Washington Times)

Maybe the first question we have to ask ourselves

when it comes to forgiveness is this:
Do I want to be right, or do I want to be reconciled?

Over Labor Day weekends I went to a presentation at the Decatur Book Festival.

Kristen Palladino wrote a book called:

Equally Wed: The Ultimate Guide to Planning Your LGBTQ+ Wedding.

I arrived a few minutes early – don't get used to it –

and got to meet Kirsten Palladino, the author,
and the gentleman who would be introducing and interviewing her.

I shared with Kirsten and the gentleman

that in the last couple years I presided at 6 LGBTQ+ weddings,
handed them my business card, offered my services,
took a seat, and waited.

Around 15 people attended the presentation

that was to have 30 minutes of book talk and 15 minutes left over for Q & A.

I decided to ask whether her book included wedding vows and liturgy.

Well, during the interview Kirsten was asked

if there had been any challenges or difficulties.

She said, *"That is one of the key reasons I wrote this book.*

When my wife and I and other friends who are LGBTQ+ were planning our weddings,

*we had bakers refuse to make a cake,
seamstresses refuse to make wedding dresses, and, sad but true,
church staff refuse to officiate or host our ceremonies.”*

As I sat there, I realized that I needed to not only ask a question,

I was going to make a statement.

So, I waited for the 30 minutes to be up so the Q & A could begin.

When questions were called for, I raised my hand, and was acknowledged.

I said, *“I am going to make a statement and then ask a question.*

On behalf of the Church of Jesus Christ and as a Christian,

*I apologize for any pain or prejudice
that has been inflicted upon you and your community.
I am sorry.”*

I let the statement sit there.

Two women to my left said, *“Thank you.”*

A woman sitting in front of me turned around and said, *“Thank you.”*

Kirsten Palladino said into the microphone, *“Thank you.”*

Then I asked my question about wedding vows and liturgy.

Afterward I made sure to buy her book and offer our support.

Do you want to be right, or do you want to be reconciled?

Would you like some more time to think about it?!

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!