

“Faith, Family, and Forgiveness...or Not, Part II”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 24, 2017

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Holy Scriptures: Matthew 20: 1-16

Matthew 20:1-16 (NRSV)

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴ and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵ When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. ⁶ And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ ⁷ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’

⁸ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ ⁹ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹² saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ ¹³ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Last Sunday morning....

...our message concluded with the story of a happening at the Decatur Book Festival.

During the Book Festival on Labor Day Weekend,

I attended a book presentation by Kirsten Palladino.

Kirsten Palladino is a local author who just published a book

on how to plan an LGBTQ+ wedding.

During the presentation, she shared experiences

when bakers, tailors, and church staff
denied support, turned their backs, & turned aside gay & lesbian couples.

I had planned to ask her a question about wedding liturgy.

However, as I listened to her story, I felt called to make a statement.

When the time came, I raised my hand and said,

*“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.”*

Three women, who were sitting nearby, turned and said, *“Thank you”*

as did Kirsten Palladino

Afterward I made sure to buy Ms. Palladino’s book and offer our church’s support.

You may call what happened after last Sunday’s message

the extravagance of God’s grace or Instant Karma.

On Tuesday afternoon...

...I called on behalf of the church to speak with Bill at the tree company
to whom we had given permission
to unload some wood chips onto church land by the parking lot.

I called Bill because a recently delivered load of wood chips

had been partially dumped onto the parking lot,
and as you know, we have 58 precious parking spaces.

I wanted the obtrusive wood chips moved.

Bill the Tree Man heard my concern.

He said -- and this is a direct quote:

"Pastor James, for the past two weeks my crew and I have been working in Smyrna.

We haven't been in Decatur for almost a month.

However, on behalf of all tree companies and as a tree man,

*I apologize for any wrong that has been done to you and your church.
I am sorry."*

Oh, man, I just about fell out.

After collecting my wits, I accepted his apology.

He said the next time he is in Decatur he'll come by w/ a brush-hog to spread the chips.

When it comes to God's forgiving grace, you just can't make this stuff up.

This Sunday morning...

...we continue to wrestle with forgiving...or not.

Love is made real in the act of forgiveness.

Mumford and Sons is an amazing band.

Truth be told, when my daughter Katie was in high school

I informed her that the Irish band Mumford and Sons are from Georgia.

I like to think that every great band is from Georgia

‘cause I want them to be homegrown talent.

Luckily Katie’s friends knew more than me,

informing her that Mumford and Sons are from Ireland.

Silly Daddy was wrong, as per usual.

Check out these lyrics from their song “*I Will Wait*”

*I came home like a stone
And I fell heavy into your arms
These days of dust which we've known
Will blow away with this new sun
And I'll kneel down
Wait for now
And I'll kneel down
Wait for now
So break my step and relent
You forgave and I won't forget*

“You forgave and I won't forget.”

Love is made real in the act of forgiveness.

I will never, ever forget that you forgave me.

No matter what happens tomorrow,

you'll always remember whomever tells you, “*I'm sorry.*”

The gift of forgiveness that you give away lives forever.

This gift has legs; it's unforgettable.

When we forgive someone else,

they are empowered to believe, to know, to trust
that *"You forgave and I won't forget."*

Thank Jesus when it comes to dealing with those whom we need to forgive,
whether we receive them as friends or enemies,
family members of casual acquaintances.

Thanks to the grace of God and the teachings of Christ, we have a choice of weapons.

Revenge? Retaliation? Resentment?

Returning evil for evil?

Freeze, fight or take flight?

What happens inside our souls when we choose to hold on to every slight that stings,

every sharp word that cuts,
every blow that laid us down for the count?

At times, we have chosen to make saints of our adversaries,

Nursing anger and resentment, not forgiving those who have wronged you
is akin to drinking poison and expecting someone else to get sick.

The only one we hurt is ourselves.

When we forgive someone else, sometimes the person we help the most is ourselves.

Not only do we have the God-given power to forgive,

when situations call for forgiveness
we have the grace-given power to decide how we'll respond.

We can choose instead to pray *"forgive us our trespasses,*

as we forgive those who trespass against us."

We can decide to release negative energy, to let go and let God,

to take on an attitude of gratitude that lessons have been learned and life is good.

Love is made real in the act of forgiveness.

One Good Friday...

...the world was turned upside down.

The promise of Easter is that death has lost its sting.

The power of Easter is the gift of becoming a new life, a new creation in Christ.

Easter resurrection not about getting into heaven.

Easter is about getting heaven into you.

Look to Calvary for the power of living a forgiving life.

From the Cross on Calvary,

Jesus modeled that if there is no forgiveness, there is no resurrection.

When Jesus was on the Cross,

he looked down and saw his enemies casting lots for his clothes.

He saw friends who denied him.

He saw beloved souls who betrayed him.

He saw troubled family members, and family members who gave him trouble.

From such a painful vantage point, Jesus said,

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

That day on Calvary Jesus Christ died,

yet his faith, his life’s work and his forgiving love live on.

He forgave and we won’t forget.

Confident in the power and promise of God to bring this vision into reality,

He gave up His last breath on earth,
which was followed by His first breath in Heaven.

There is life after life.

There is also life after broken and damaged relationships.

His resurrection from the dead into life after life

proved that there is life after our troubling encounters, as well.

Neither death nor evil will have the last word, the last say, nor make the last point.

The Good News is that no matter what happened in our past,

God and God's people are fully committed
to changing our present for the sake of the future, where hope is alive.

Look to Calvary for the power of living a forgiving life.

From his vantage point of the Cross

Jesus looked up and saw a vision of the Kingdom of God,
the Great Banquet, the Beloved Community on earth as it is in heaven.

He had spoken in parables when he described the Kingdom of God,

saying it *"is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground,
is the smallest of all the seeds on earth;*

*yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs,
and puts forth large branches,*

so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." (Mark 4: 31-32)

Just a year or so earlier Jesus had said, *"Let the little children come to me,
and do not stop them;*

for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." (Mt
19:14)

The Kingdom belongs to the children of God, to the vulnerable and
disregarded.

Jesus taught that the keys to the Kingdom of God are given to you!

*“Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven,
and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”* (Mt 16: 19)

He pointed out that the everlasting domain of God

is compared to being in the presence of a landowner (Mt 20: 1-16)
who hires laborers all day long,
and at the end of the day, at the end of their days, our days,
rewards all souls with the same generous wages.

If God’s grace is true, we will all be paid; we will all be forgiven.

The ultimate act of God’s love is made real in forgiveness.

One Saturday morning...

...five decades ago, when I was around 6 years old,

I showed my mother my half-eaten roll of root beer flavored Lifesavers.

Mother and I were hauling several bags of groceries,

and were almost home after walking several blocks from the store.

While she had been paying for our groceries at the supermarket,

I had taken the roll of Lifesavers candy from the counter display.

Now, since we were near our block and half of the Lifesavers were in my tummy,

I figured I was in the clear.

I figured wrong.

Mom promptly turned around and marched my butt all the way back,

where she sought out the store manager.

She informed him that I had an apology for him.

I recall staring at the tops of my shoes, feeling the shame,

and mumbling the correct words.

The store manager accepted both my apology and her 6 cents to pay for the candy.

Mother never mentioned it again.

She let it go.

All was forgiven,

all was forgotten, except for the lesson learned.

Clearly, she saw a teachable moment ripe for the plucking.

Even though I never again ate a root beer flavored Lifesaver,

the real lifesavers were life lessons about integrity,

owning up to poor judgment and selfish behavior,

and discovering that, when it comes to our practice of forgiveness,

it's never too early and it is never too late.

This Sunday morning...

...we may still wrestle with being forgiving,
yet we know enough to give thanks for the amazing grace of God.

The ultimate act of God's love is made real in forgiveness.

If God's grace is true, we will all be paid,

we will all be saved,
we will all be redeemed,
and every day we all have opportunities

to express to God and one another and ourselves,
“You forgave, and I will not forget.”

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