

*Ready for a Change: Forgiveness*

Job 42:1-6, The Message; Matthew 6:5-15

Whitefish UMC

February 25, 2009

- † Here at the church we are blessed with the children of our preschool and daycare. Every day children's voices fill the building. Often we hear words of love and grace from the little ones.
- † One day, the older children were about to eat lunch when I came down to see them. They had just said grace, and so they decided to tell me about their prayers. One said, "I prayed to God and all the angels to watch over me." Another one said, "I prayed for my grandma in heaven." Still another prayed for her puppy.
- † One serious child said, "I prayed for all the children in the world." Then the first child, looking around the table with a grin, said, "Well, I guess that makes us the prayer-ies!"
- † The children are adorable and sweet. Most of the time. But there are days, like today, when their howls of anger and frustration get the best of them. They act in destructive ways that are unrecognizable from their gentler and more loving selves.
- † The late Bishop Lance Webb used to tell a story about a little five-year old boy who misbehaved badly. His mother put him in time-out. She had a large closet, so she pushed back the hangers in the closet so there would be room for his chair. She turned on the light and told him he would have to stay in the closet for 20 minutes.
- † The mother heard strange sounds inside the closet, and then everything got quiet. The mother got concerned, so she opened the

- door. “Jimmy, what on earth are you doing?” The little boy replied defiantly, “I just pulled all your clothes down and spit on them. I spit on your shoes, too. Now I’m just sitting here waiting for more spit.”
- † One of the children who spoke so lovingly about their prayers a few days ago around the table might have been the spitting little boy of the Bishop’s story today.
  - † Heaven knows that this sort of contradictory behavior is not reserved for children, either. I know some older kids and grown-ups who get angry and react the same way. You can look at them and tell that they are just sitting around waiting for more spit.
  - † Indeed all of us have a tendency to harbor grievances against other people. I know I do, despite my best efforts. In our heads, we know that forgiveness is healthy. Medical science has linked a failure to forgive with all kinds of ailments, including stress, anxiety, depression, headaches, backaches, stomach distress, diabetes, hypertension, and heart problems.
  - † Then why do we keep failing to forgive—each other, and ourselves? Because real forgiveness is always a minor miracle. Real forgiveness, or “forgiveness from the heart” as Jesus called it, requires more than will power. It is contrary to human nature and requires help from God.
  - † Have you read Khaled Hosseini’s best seller “The Kite Runner” or seen the movie? In it, the author says, “I became what I am today at the age of 12, on a frigid overcast day.”
  - † On that day Khaled witnessed something terrible being done to his best friend, but Khaled was afraid to intervene, so he ran away. For

- the rest of his life he bore the guilt of having deserted his friend. Finally, he confessed his guilt to a religious leader in Afghanistan.
- † The leader told Khaled that he could shed his guilt by doing lots of good things to make up for his sin. But it didn't work. Khaled discovered that no matter how much good he did, and he did many great things, guilt is not something you can work off, like demerits.
  - † For Christians, forgiveness comes as the grace of God offered through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus spoke about forgiveness often, and one of the most important things he said occurs in our Lord's prayer.
  - † "Forgive us our sins as we also forgive those who sin against us." Can we be forgiven if we fail to forgive others? Jesus' answer is clear: not really. No.
  - † Sounds pretty harsh, doesn't it? But unless you are really fortunate, forgiveness doesn't happen like a bolt out of the blue. First you have to open yourself up to the possibility of forgiving, and being forgiven.
  - † And lest you think you have nothing to be forgiven for—after all, you're not a drug dealer, a murderer, a thief, a terrorist—right? But scarcely a day goes by that holds a need to forgive and to be forgiven.
  - † Here's an example to which we can all relate: if you're married, or if you're a parent or an almost-grown child, you know there are certain subjects you shouldn't bring up in conversation, because those subjects aggravate or even hurt.
  - † Something within us inclines us to dredge up hurtful memories and use them as sledge hammers against the very people we love the most. And if that's how we treat the people we love, it doesn't take much to imagine what we can do to people we don't even like.

- † We put lots of conditions on forgiveness. We'll forgive someone if they apologize first. But actually it's up to God to seek repentance before issuing forgiveness, not us.
- † Sometimes we say, "I'll forgive that person but I'll never forget what they did." We like to roll around the offense on our tongue, savor it, remind ourselves of how we have been wronged. We may say we have forgiven, but our eyes narrow and the pitch of our voice changes when we speak of the offense.
- † Remember, though, that forgiveness doesn't mean excusing something or pretending it didn't happen. Some people think that if you forgive someone who has bullied or cheated or abused you, you must pretend that the offense didn't really happen and wasn't so bad after all.
- † God does not mean for us to distort reality or put up with more abuse. God does mean for us to cleanse our heart of the poison of resentment, which can wreck our relationship with God and others, harm our health, and steal our joy.
- † Dr. Bill Bouknight offers these seven steps toward forgiveness:
  1. Acknowledge that you have been hurt; admit your anger and resentment.
  2. Offer your anger or your guilt to our loving God, and confess what you have done.
  3. Remind yourself that God, rather than retaliating against us, offers forgiveness by showing us the forgiveness possible through Jesus Christ.
  4. Face the fact that unless you're willing to forgive others, your belief in God's forgiveness of you is hollow.

5. With God's help, open yourself up to forgiveness.
6. Ask daily for God to give you the power to forgive.
7. As God releases you from the prison of resentment, ask if you should notify your former enemy that you have forgiven them. Sometimes this helps, sometimes it doesn't. Ask God to help you figure that out.

† Let me close with a story that is close to my heart. It comes from the book by Marlo Thomas entitled, *The Right Words at the Right Time*. The author Amy Tan recalls the awful power struggles she had with her mother when she was growing up. Her mother criticized her excessively, often humiliating her in front of others, refusing to listen to her side of the story.

† Amy Tan recalls shouting at her mother, "I hate you. I wish you were dead." Fast forward 30 years. Amy was now 46. For the past three years, her mother had suffered from Alzheimer's disease. One day when Amy visited her, she said,  
Amy, something is wrong with my mind. I feel like I can't remember many things, even what I did yesterday. I can't remember what happened a long time ago, but somehow I know I did something to hurt you."

† Amy started to say, "O, not really. Don't worry," but her mother continued, "I did terrible things. But now I can't remember what...and I just want to tell you...I hope you can forget just as I've forgotten."

† Amy instantly realized this was her mother's plea for forgiveness. After she left her mother, Amy cried tears of sadness and happiness. Something in her chest had been pent up for a long time and was now

gone. Her mother died six months later. But she had left a wonderful memory.

- † Together they knew in their hearts the glory of forgiving—and truly releasing the past.
- † If God were to name the person we should forgive first, who would it be? Would it be yourself? Would it be someone you love? Would it be a stranger who has wronged you? An enemy?
- † Write that person's name on your piece of paper. Then write down what you'd like to ask God's forgiveness for yourself.
- † As we move into the vestibule, get ready for a change—forgiveness. And may it free you for a journey toward Easter joy. Amen.

Sources:

Dr. Bill Bouknight, [www.sermons.com](http://www.sermons.com)