

“Forgiving Yourself: Ways To Build Each Other Up”

Matthew 18:21-30

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At a bowling alley, two men were talking about marriage. One man said, “My wife and I argue a lot, and every time we argue she gets *historical*. His friend interrupted him, “You meant to say that she gets *hysterical*, didn't you?” The first man responded, “No, when my wife and I argue, she doesn't get hysterical; she gets *historical*. She drags up everything from the past and holds it against me.” Don't get me wrong. I don't mean to interrupt your married life to make any judgment, but I just shared a joke with you before beginning my sermon.

Some of us may be ‘historical’ in our relationships. You may recall every single bad thing or hurtful event that has occurred to you and use them to defend yourself when you argue with your partner. One day, while I was arguing with my wife about my household duties, she often recalled details that I promised her (I promised her that I would do laundry, wash dishes, and spend at least eight hours to take care of Jacob per week). I was impressed by her keen memory! I wish she would have forgotten some promises as the time went by. We live in many relationships. It is like a spider web to be connected to many places, and different people and different personalities. We cannot imagine our life without encounters and interactions with people. Sometimes, we easily hurt others and get hurt from others, too. Forgiveness is needed when we want to live out our life without trouble in our relationships, but we are not always good at this task.

Maybe, some of us have trouble in dealing with our emotions of anger, frustration, grief and pain, when our hearts are hurting. It is easy to go back to those memories and to get stuck there. One of my colleagues, who is a professional counselor, told me that most of his clients come because they can't let go. Past experiences powerfully influence us. Let's be honest with ourselves. Sometimes, we pretend to be strong, peaceful and mature, but none of us are professionals at handle our feelings well. One clear thing is that without letting go of our emotional feelings, there will be no genuine peace in our soul. This morning, I hope that we find peace through acts of forgiveness to ‘let it go.’

Jesus Christ came to bring us peace. Jesus Christ appeared to his disciples and shared a greeting by saying, “Peace be with you!” Jesus also said in the Gospel of John “I am leaving you with a gift -- peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid. (John

14:27)” Peace is “freedom from disturbance” and tranquility in your heart. Imagine your heart as a big lake. There is ‘no turbulence’ but only ‘still water’ in your heart and soul. Peace doesn’t mean only peace between nations, but it is also within your own soul.

Let us go back to our Scripture reading which doesn’t directly illustrate peace. It deals with an issue of relationships when someone is hurt. Peter asked his master, Jesus how many times he should forgive brothers and sisters who hurt him. He wondered if seven times was the maximum for his patience, but Jesus surprisingly challenged him saying, “Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven.” What do you think? Does it make sense for us? Seventy times seven literally means you should try to forgive others ‘four hundred ninety times’!! Can you do this? Peter focused on his own capability to tolerate other’s hurting him, but Jesus’ focus was to have Peter practice repeated acts of forgiveness until he genuinely found peace through ‘letting go.’

We often experience hurt that keeps occurring even though we thought it was over. That happens to us. What if someone hurts you by saying, “You are a liar. So I don’t trust you.” Even though it turns out to prove you are innocent, your hurt won’t go right away. For a while, you have to work on forgiving one who hurt you first of all, but you also have to work on forgiving yourself to let go of your emotions. It is not easy at all, but painful. Often, I believe that the genuine forgiveness happens when you are able to forgive yourself before you forgive others. In a sense, we can interpret Jesus’ teaching in a different viewpoint. We don’t know exactly what caused Peter get hurt. He might have struggled with the opponents who still continued to criticize his sincere faith or damaged his reputation as the disciple, because he denied Jesus three times in the past. Jesus might have challenged Peter by saying, whether he would be willing to forgive the same person and the same hurt that occurs back to him ‘seventy times seven’. Forgiveness should begin with the concept of a gift to yourself first.

We ask ourselves another question, “Why should we practice this forgiveness and not a proper punishment? What is the purpose of our mercy?” Let’s think about this: Once hurt, it easily disturbs our heart and soul and distracts our inner peace. Holding onto our hurt distorts our sound mind and starts destroying our sound relationship with God. We lose our freedom and become slaves of our emotions. The Buddhist priest, Thich Nhat Hanh says, “The amount of happiness that you have depends on the amount of freedom you have in your heart.” Even though he was a Buddhist priest, he understood Jesus’ teaching.

I also would like you to think about forgiveness as God's grace. In our Scripture reading, Jesus introduced a parable about a king and one servant to describe the Kingdom of God. It illustrates a model relationship between forgiveness and grace. In this parable, the king's servant had a huge debt to him. The King offered to forgive his servant's debt, so that this servant had another chance to be free from the 'debt'. However the servant in turn didn't offer his grace and mercy to one who owed him ten dollars. Even though the servant received generosity from the King, he didn't offer his grace to others. This shows who we are. We are very self-centered people. We want grace and mercy, but we are selfish towards others.

As the king erased the servant's debt of a hundred thousand dollars without any condition, so did God grace us the same through his only son's death. Because of Jesus' act of redemption, we are saved and redeemed. This is grace! God let go of His anger, hurt and frustration and took them all for us, and he gave us peace instead. If we are not willing to offer our grace to those who hurt us through forgiveness, we are still slaves to these emotions. Truly, forgiveness is a gift to yourself as God's grace.

We are not able to generate this gift, but God can offer it. Our hearts must be ready to receive this gift. Please look at my hands. Our hearts are like these two hands. Our hands are always full of something: it could be our stuff, ego, pride, or our shame, guilt, hurt and pain of past. But if our hands are full, there is no way to receive God's gift of grace. In order to receive God's grace, we have to empty ourselves of something to make room for grace. If we decide to open our hands to God, God will pour his grace with gifts of forgiveness and peace in our hearts. Let's open our hearts, open our minds, open our doors and open our hands, so that God's grace can come into our hearts and lead our lives into forgiveness and peace.