

## **“Forgiving Others: Ways to Build Each Other Up”**

Matthew 18:15-20

May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012

Rev. Jeong Park

Fair Oaks United Methodist Church

There are many things to do in life. Do you remember five things that we should do before we end our life on earth? “I forgive you. You forgive me. Thank you. I love you. Good-bye.” ‘Forgiveness’ is not an easy task to do, but we must practice it in our daily lives. Many times, Jesus taught and reminded his disciples to forgive others during his ministry. Even the Lord’s Prayer encourages us to forgive those who trespass against us.

This May and June, I am going to deal with a new sermon series: “Ways to Build Each Other Up.” Reconciling Committee will lead a special worship on May 27<sup>th</sup>, Dan Hardt will give us a special message on the topic of “forgiveness” on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, and on June 10<sup>th</sup>, we will have your special attention and support for our Youth group ministry. I hope that we find a way to build up one another through this opportunity.

Jesus Christ didn’t come to us for blaming our sins or faults. Rather, he was willing to take our shame and guilt for forgiving us and setting us free in God’s love and grace. The Oxford English Dictionary defines forgiveness as ‘to grant free pardon and to give up all claim on account of an offense or debt’, but in our faith, ‘forgiveness’ includes much more meaning than pardoning our debt. It includes restoration and reconciliation in our relationship with God and one another. A forgiving act involves listening, understanding and embracing each other’s differences. God’s sacrificial act of love in Jesus Christ is to show us God’s forgiving grace.

Think about Jesus’ ministry. His miracles and activities were set for restoring our relationship with God, forgiving our sins, healing the sick. This helped his people to go back to their community and regained their relationships. Jesus Christ mended our hurts and wounds and he accepted us as we are. I hope that we learn about Jesus’ teaching, especially about ‘forgiveness’ this morning.

In a sense, the church is a people, a community of faith and fellowship. It seems to be natural that there are different perspectives, understandings and different wishes. Imagine your relationship with your family members. Do you fully understand your wife, or your husband, or even do you fully know your

children? It is hard to understand others who are different from me. Probably, it may be impossible that we fully understand each other. This could be a reason why we are hurt, wounded and misunderstood. The same thing occurs in church life as well.

Today's Scripture reading shows us an aspect of Matthew's faith community. Let me read today's text in a modern English version: <sup>15-17</sup>"If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him—work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you've made a friend. If he won't listen, take one or two others along so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest, and try again. And you'll offer again God's forgiving love. (The Message)"

We don't know exactly what caused the community friction, but we see that there were some conflicts among the congregation. They were losing unity, and peace. Let's revisit our text to see what happened. In our reading, it says, "another member of the church sins against you", here the word, "sins" doesn't necessarily mean immoral things. The word 'sin', or *hamartia* in Greek, came originally from the world of archery and means "missing the mark." It can describe any failure to become the people we were created to be. Eugene Peterson paraphrases this word to "hurt." In other words, it can be your anger, hatred or criticism like entangled threads. Jesus asks us to let it go with a forgiving love.

Jesus is described as a teacher in the Gospel of Matthew. He talked about three steps for practicing forgiveness: The first step is direct communication (go and tell if a fellow believer hurts you.) The next step is to listen patiently (between the two of you, and one or two others along with you and try again) and the last step is to be honest with yourself and to others. Do you think this makes sense for us? As it happened to the early Christian church community, it may be the same in our modern church. Sadly, we are not often used to direct conversation. When we have any conflicts in the church community, these are not handled through direct communication. Much of our communication is more indirect, whispering to the third parties, or making guesses not based on facts but as gossip. This happened to Matthew's faith community as well.

Listening is the most important way to understand one another. Most conflicts occur as a result of miscommunication with each other. When I came to the United States ten years ago, the first two expressions that I learned from my friends were "Hang in there" and "put yourself in other's shoes". I don't know where the expressions originated, but I thought there were interesting. My baby turned 18 months old. Now, one of his favorite things is to pull all kinds of shoes on the floor and he tries to put them on. Last night, he pulled mommy's

high heel shoes and tried them on. But obviously it didn't work well. He ended up crying. It is hard to be in someone else's shoes!

Jacob's frustration reminds me of the decisions voted on at the 2012 General Conference of the United Methodist Church held in Tampa, Florida from April 24<sup>th</sup> to May 4<sup>th</sup>. The General Conference represents the entire United Methodist Church on behalf of 12 million Methodist people around the world. Only the General Conference can speak for the United Methodist Church. One of the resolutions was to consider changing our language about Homosexuality in the Book of Discipline. The Book of Discipline, Paragraph 161F states: "The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching." This is not what our congregation represents. We believe that "each individual is of sacred worth. We welcome different gender brothers and sisters into the full life of our church community." But the General Conference decided to leave the original language in the Book of Discipline until the next General Conference to be held in 2016.

John Wesley once said, "Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may." But we often fail to listen to each other in the other person's shoes. We have to wait for another four years to raise our voice again. The main lesson that Jesus teaches Matthew's faith community is not to judge nor punish. But listen carefully and try to put yourself in another's shoes before you do take any action. Jesus focused on reconciliation and restoration. The spirit of forgiveness is to treat one another with the same mercy and compassion that God has shown to us. The Bible reminds us that we are created to love God, each other and forgive (respect) one another in pursuing understanding, embracing and building up each other in God's love. That is the purpose of God's creation. Simply speaking, Jesus Christ, the son of God came down to us to love us, putting himself in our shoes and he embraced us and brought our broke relationship back to the 'right mark' in our relationship with God and His people. As followers of Christ, we are called to do likewise, to do all in our power to work toward reconciliation for the witness of the gospel.