The Way of the Cross: Repentance and Forgiveness

Matthew 18:15-35 Kimby Young

Psalm 51 March 19, 2017

Repentance is a key theme of Lent. We begin even on Ash Wednesday with Psalm 51 asking God’s forgiveness, asking God to cleanse us and help us start anew. We try to identify our own sins and we repent from any wrongdoing. Throughout Lent we are invited to think about what needs to change in our lives, what holds us back from the greatness that God has created in us. Forgiveness is central during Lent, and a fundamental meaning behind the cross of Christ. Jesus suffered and died, and rose again that we might be forgiven and reunited with God for all eternity. And not only us, but the entire world. Forgiveness is God’s love in action.

Forgiveness is also very difficult. If you have ever had to forgive someone, if you have ever been forgiven, if you have ever tried to forgive yourself – then you know – the power in forgiveness, the power in this kind of love.

It is not surprising that forgiveness is a key topic in the Bible. The gospel reading from Matthew begins with advice about conflict resolution. If someone hurts you, don’t slink away in resentment, don’t retaliate in anger. If someone hurts you, go to them and try to make it right. The same is true in the reverse, if you realize you have hurt someone, go to them and try to make amends. It is a key step in modern 12 step programs – try to make things right, when you are able. Of course often we are not able. The point of the scripture is to do your best, to use the resources of the church and the care of the community to try to make things right – to try to mend relationships and connections. Try to be loving – not by ignoring things or talking behind someone’s back, but by caring and confronting and calling one another to be faithful.

We all know that doesn’t always happen in the church – we even know that hasn’t always happened in this church. We have argued, we have disagreed. Some of us may have said some things we are not proud of. Some of us may have been hurt by others, even sitting in this room. Or perhaps even worse – those who are no longer here and have broken fellowship with us. Forgiveness is hard. Forgetfulness seems easier – or at least pretending to forget. Ignoring the hurt as if it will go away. But true healing requires forgiveness – facing the hurt head on and trying to make it better. It requires change, transformation. And forgiveness can be very painful. The cross is about pain – as well as love. The cross reminds us of the true cost of sin, betrayal, selfishness, evil.

In Matthew, Peter asks “how many times should I forgive someone? Seven times?” In the Bible seven is the number for completion, wholeness. So Peter is probably repeating a discussion of the day – the teachers of the law would say you should not only forgive someone once but forgive them completely – even seven times. That would have been considered very generous, and Peter is asking – do we really have to be that generous when someone wrongs us. I can only take so much after all. Jesus’ answer is numerically absurd – whether it is seventy seven times or seventy times seven as the old translations say. And Jesus answer is not to be taken literally. Jesus is saying take the highest number you can imagine. Don’t even count how many times you forgive. We should forgive freely and abundantly and without limitation.

So why is that? Why should we forgive? Jesus goes on to tell the parable about the servant who is forgiven and then refuses to forgive a lesser offence. Forgiveness is not about who has wronged us. Forgiveness is about your own heart. If I refuse to forgive it damages me more than it hurts anyone else. If I forgive, it not only shows love to someone else, it opens my heart to goodness and joy and peace. Create in me a clean heart, O God, a new heart, a heart set rightly on you and your love. If I forgive, I am set right – no matter what happens to the other person. Forgiveness brings healing.

Of course, forgiveness is easier said than done. When we are hurt, when we hurt someone, a relationship is broken, a part of ourselves is broken. It is not simple to turn that pain around. Actually, turning around is the true definition of repentance – as I said in the children’s time. To repent means to turn – generally in Christian terms to turn from sin and back to God. It is a change of direction. Instead of facing anger, pain, sin, or evil, we repent – we turn to face God – to keep our eyes on God. That turning takes energy, power, determination, will. But honestly, we sometimes do not have the ability to turn ourselves – we are too weak or broken or frightened or hurt. We cannot change our own hearts.

Forgiveness is when Jesus steps in and changes our hearts for us. Jesus makes the turn for us, that we may face God again, that we may be in relationship with God again face to face. That is what happened on the cross. Jesus moved for us. Jesus took on sin for us. Jesus made the turn for us, so that we could be facing the right direction again, so that we could be with God again. This is forgiveness. This is redemption. This is the power of the cross. When we were too weak to change what needed to change, when we are too broken to heal ourselves, Jesus did it for us. Jesus died on the cross to break the power of sin and death. Jesus rose from the dead to offer us new life, a new heart, new direction, new … grace.

We are that first servant of the king – forgiven ten thousand bags of debt. We are set free and sent into the world to live abundantly. How can we not forgive anyone who owes us a few pieces of silver? Look to the cross and see forgiveness made real.

I end with another invitation for a Lenten discipline. I invite you to think about anyone you have hurt, and anyone who has hurt you. Make a list if you need to. And don’t forget to put yourself on the list. Sometimes it is hardest of all to forgive yourself.

The invitation for now is to just pray the list. Pray for God’s forgiveness. Pray for God’s guidance in your forgiveness. Pray. And see where God leads you next. Again discipleship is not about perfection. It’s about practice. So pray your lists of forgiveness for the people you have hurt, for the people who have hurt you, for yourself and your relationships. Pray. Listen for God’s guidance and respond as you feel able. And as always, if you need help, if you want someone to talk with about forgiveness, give me a call or talk to someone else you trust. Look to the cross and accept the grace our Savior gives so freely. Look to the cross and receive forgiveness by the grace of God. Amen.