

Forgiven and Forgiving

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Holy Communion

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Reference Notes: Dr. R. F. Tidmore and Rev. Joretta L. Marshall

Scriptures: Ephesians 4: 31,32; Mark 22: 2 5,26; Colossians 3:13

In a few weeks I will begin a new contract and my third year with you as an Intentional Interim Minister. Some of my thoughts are reflective of my time this past week at the General Assembly. My continued work will embrace some of the issues we addressed over the past two years but will be more of a "*pastor in residence*" while the Search Committee fulfills its roll.

The interim time for the congregation can be wonderful when we turn to God's Word for refreshment and renewal. We must first name the demons that have disrupted our essentially comfortable lives and declare if we have been victimized or are victimisers; whether or not we are victims or participants in the chaos. Paul knew what it meant to be in a place of turmoil and his desire to see the Church put its energy into the mission. We might say in our language, "get on with it." Writing to the Ephesians (Eph. 4:) he appealed to them, *Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you. [NKJV]*

One characteristic of our sinful human nature is the tendency to hold a grudge. We are tempted to dislike or even hate our enemies and speak evil of those who mistreat us, but Jesus said we are to love them. Jesus taught, *You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward will you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect. (Matt 5:43-48 NKJV).*

Vengeance can be a strong temptation and some succumb to its allure, but God says that vengeance belongs to Him. *Paul wrote, Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all people. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all people. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord. Therefore if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom. 12:17-21, NKJV).* There are specific biblical principles that govern the way we must forgive others. Although they are not always easy to employ, they are not optional!

Jesus taught why we must forgive. In order to be forgiven, He taught:
-and forgive us our debts/trespases/sins, as we forgive our debtors. (Matt. 6:12)

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matt. 6:14,15)
-And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive them, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses. (Mark 11:25,26).

Everyone has sinned and therefore, everyone needs forgiveness.
-for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Rom. 3:23).

Walking into a congregation as an interim minister often means walking into unresolved situations where forgiveness was either never offered or never processed. Human community is fraught with situations where we feel, betrayed, angry, hurt or oppressed by the actions or inactions of others. No matter how healthy the congregation, one thing is certain, some relationships in the midst of the community have experienced a rupture, an injury, or a fracture. Perhaps it was over something twenty or more years ago, disagreements about a political issue that tested the church's ability to hold together competing and conflicting visions, or the conduct of a former clergy person or someone in leadership. Whatever the case, there remains a high probability, either under the surface or out in the open, that hurt, anger and betrayal exist alongside a desire for forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a human issue because we are created in relationship. It is a theological issue because we are created in the image of God who is forgiving and invites us to live as a forgiven and forgiving people. We find our most meaningful and profound experiences through relationships with those who surround us, but we also reckon with the fact that it is in these places we also experience our deepest wounds and hurts. If it were not for the gift of God's forgiveness and our responsive actions as forgiven and forgiving people, we would be doomed to be in relationships that were always problematic and hurtful.

Forgiveness invites us to move through the hurt, not around, beyond or over, and into the redemptive power of grace-filled relationships. It often falls to the interim pastor to lead the work of forgiveness when there has been conflictual actions which occurred under circumstances that have left the congregation, or some of the membership feeling distrustful, hurt or wounded. It is then a "must" that the congregation engage a process that empowers, naming the hurt and pain, to recount the experiences and feelings of hurt and to move toward healing and understanding by acts of repentance and signs of forgiveness.

There is often a temptation to want to move too fast through the forgiveness process or to want to deny the power of the hurt and avoid the process altogether. Neither of these options works well in congregation community. Denying the pain and trying to simply forgive and forget sets the congregation up to live with unresolved feelings and experiences, sometimes for a decade or longer. The result is the congregation will live out those dynamics in the future with the new pastoral leaders. Moving too fast through the process doesn't allow the membership to actually experience the work of forgiveness, arriving at a false sense of reconciliation and peace. Good

forgiveness process takes the time necessary to face the pain and hurt, allowing the people at different points to both recognize how they have been hurt and how they have participated in contributing to hurting others.

Forgiveness is difficult and can sometimes be painful work requiring honesty and courage to face the failures in others and in ourselves. The process of forgiveness includes:

- Naming the hurt and understanding the hurt from the perspective of others.
- Recognizing how different parts of a system contributed to the hurt and pain without blaming one another.
- Allowing the feelings of anger and hurt to be expressed without destroying one another; identifying one's own participation in the chaos that occurred without feeling shamed.
- Offering grace to one another and extending forgiveness to those who have harmed us.
- Repenting and making changes that move one to ask for forgiveness from those who have been harmed.
- Changing ways of relating so that damage and hurt in the future will be minimised.
- Claiming a posture of reconciliation and forgiveness as appropriate to the context so that the wholeness of community can be experienced.

In each of these movements, attention needs to be paid to the use and potential abuse of power.

We can encourage and foster attitudes of forgiveness, but we cannot make it happen. We can only set the stage within this worship community and work to foster attitudes of forgiveness within the body. It begins with encouraging everyone to name your particular hurt(s) and set it in your own language for that pain. Every person's participation assumes they will speak forthrightly and honestly.

From time to time we will continue to ask you gently to reflect theologically on issues of forgiveness in the Scripture, in historic context and in reality. We will continue to draw upon the richness of our liturgical and theological tradition to reflect upon forgiveness as a way to live out the gospel in the world and specifically within our city and county.

As your pastor in residence, I today and regularly over my continued time with you, I will emphasize that we are called as the people of God to live as forgiven and forgiving people in the world where God has placed us. As a faithful people of God, we are invited to embrace the liberation that comes with forgiveness. Today, as we come to the Holy Table to receive the gifts of God for the people of God, we do so with faith, believing, *that God so loved the world He send us His own loving Son.* Amen.