

Sunday - October 25, 2009
Pastor - Rev. Paula P. Werner
Sermon - **As We Forgive....**

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be formed by your grace for you are our Lord, our rock, and our redeemer. Amen.

Who do you look like? It is said that we are created in God's image.... now that has nothing to do with physical looks, like freckles, dimples, height or hair color. That part of our DNA comes from our earthly mother and father's genes. But we are more than just molecules and chemistry. We are created in the image of God --- who is without gender or physical attributes, but who is known by characteristics that we humans can understand. We are created in God's image in that we can love, show mercy, be faithful, offer forgiveness. To the extent that we use our lives to be merciful, faithful, to love and forgive, we are acting in Godly ways.

God is perfect; we are not. God's ways are not easy ways to emulate. Yet that is what we are called to. God forgives us; God has forgiven us. You and I are called to forgive. Yet, forgiveness is achingly difficult to show – it's not exactly a natural act.

Joseph's story that we just saw enacted is proof of the difficulty of forgiving. Joseph had no real reason to forgive his brothers. Just remember how awful they had treated him. These brothers had bullied, him, cooked up schemes to murder him, had sold him into slavery. Joseph had spent the best years of his youth doing time in an Egyptian dungeon. He had been sold away from the father he loved, his family, his country. Everything that he had dreamed for his future was yanked away from him. Abandonment, meanness, hatred – that's what the brothers had shown him. It's likely that none of us have experienced this kind of treatment from our siblings. But it's also likely that some of us harbor some ill will toward a brother or sister; we feel we have not been treated fairly. For some of us, there is something that keeps us from being close to our sibling – it's likely that there is some forgiveness that needs to happen.... and it has not.

In Joseph's situation, his difficulties did not last for just a few days or months, we are talking about years lost to the life that he had known. While in Egypt, Joseph did well – remarkably well. He was smart and used the abilities God had given him; Joseph advanced himself. In fact, Joseph got well ahead in life, nonetheless, wealth and prestige and success are helpful, but do not fill the void of the loss of your family.

Just when Joseph is at the "top of his game" in Egypt, having proved his merit and his loyalty to the Pharaoh, his brothers appear. They have come from the land of Canaan—we call it Israel, where the famine is leading to starvation. The brothers have come to Egypt where the government has laid in stores of grain, and people can eat. Joseph's brothers need what Joseph has, in order to live. Joseph's brothers do not recognize him. After all he was just a teenager when they last saw him, and he's now an adult – maybe with a growth of beard, and certainly different

dress than when he was a shepherd boy. But Joseph recognizes his brothers. Yet, Joseph was not at the point where he could forgive his brothers. Joseph was still at the revenge part. You know that part --- when someone has hurt you horribly, has betrayed you, has done something awful, and you just want to get even. Joseph decided to get his revenge for the way his brothers had treated him years before. Joseph played some tricks on his brothers – they were truly at Joseph’s mercy, they needed food to eat, and Joseph caused one brother to be imprisoned in the guardhouse, he threatened slavery for the other brothers, and additional grief for his parents because of Joseph’s demand that all brothers must come to Egypt in order to receive grain. Joseph and his steward set up what we would call entrapment – by placing money and a silver cup in the grain bags and then accusing the brothers of thievery. We can’t completely know Joseph’s motivation for these actions – maybe he wanted to see how his brothers would react and what their character was like, and if they had changed since he last lived with them. Or maybe Joseph was relishing making them squirm.... Whatever the motivation for his actions, the story’s honesty in portraying strong emotions between brothers resonates with us. But Joseph soon realizes that these actions, this vengefulness is not bringing him any satisfaction. Listen now for the Word of God for you as I read what happened next in Joseph’s story: Read: **Gen. 45:1-5**

Joseph forgives his brothers; he **chose** to forgive his brothers. He did not have to; he was living on top, in control, he could have punished his brothers; he could have ignored them; he had every option available in how to respond, and **he chose forgiveness**. Oh, yes, it took a bit before he forgave..... forgiveness of horrible hurts often takes time. When we feel wronged, we can contrive a hundred reasons against forgiveness. Reasons such as: he needs to learn a lesson. Why encourage irresponsible behavior. Just let her stew for a while; it will do her good. She needs to learn that actions have consequences. I was the wronged party – it’s not up to me to make the first move. How can I forgive if he’s not even sorry? Yes, there are a lot of reasons that go through our minds to justify not forgiving. Joseph likely had a few of those thoughts about his brothers. When Joseph finally came to the place of forgiving his brothers, his hurt did not disappear. What did disappear, was the burden of being his brothers’ judge. Though wrong does not disappear when we forgive, it loses its grip on us and is taken over by God, who knows what to do.

Let me give you a couple more stories to consider as you mull over this idea of forgiveness and whether you want to be a forgiving person. (stories from Mickey Anders) First story: There once were two shopkeepers who owned stores across the street from one another and who had had a falling out in years past that neither could forgive. They had nurtured their hatred for one another for many years. One night the angel of the Lord came to the first shopkeeper and said, "The Lord has sent me to you with the promise to grant one wish no matter how extravagant. There is only one catch - Whatever you receive, your rival shopkeeper will receive two-fold." The

shopkeeper thought and then replied, "My wish is that you would strike me blind in one eye!"

The second story took place while the Civil War was still raging. President Lincoln was asked how he would treat rebellious southerners after the war was over. The questioner clearly expected Lincoln to opt for some form of retribution or vengeance but was taken aback when the President replied, "I will treat them as if they had never been away."

Two stories. Two ways of responding to horrible situations we find ourselves in. We have a choice – to forgive or not to forgive. We have a choice as to which kind of person we want to be. We can be the one who nurtures our grudges and hatreds to the point of self-destruction or we can be the one who forgives! We can orient our lives around blessing or curse. Which will it be for you: the half blind shopkeeper's way or President Lincoln's way?

If you're now sitting thinking, "well, it's easy for her to offer some stories and choices, but she hasn't experienced the awful things that have been done to me." My response, "Forgiveness is always harder than the sermons make it out to be." (Elizabeth O'Connor quote) Yes, it truly is! Living a Christian life, following Jesus' example certainly isn't without demands. Forgiveness is one of the hardest. (11:00 a.m. I added: "But lack of forgiveness is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.")

Every Sunday, as a congregation of believers, we say in unison the Lord's Prayer. Perhaps you say it a few other times a week in other settings and circumstances. Most of that prayer is quite easy to pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread." Thus far, this has not been a difficult prayer to fully and honestly pray..... now comes the hard part.... "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

"as we forgive, as we forgive, as we forgive...." *As = because, since, seeing that, like.* AS is the terrifying word because Jesus plainly links **our** forgiveness by the Father with **our** forgivingness of fellow human beings." We are to be forgiven as we forgive others. The idea is picked up again just after the Lord's Prayer when Jesus says, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15). We ALL want forgiveness. That's easy. It's the **giving** forgiveness that is hard.

What grudge are you holding onto? What anger is seething just under the surface? What betrayal have you suffered and for which you

cannot come to terms? What will it take for you to let go of that ugliness, that hurt, that pain, that vengefulness. I read an article that said, **“forgiveness is about control.** Learning to live in the mercy of God means letting go of our compulsion to control. Forgiveness is about having the courage to remove the barriers to relationships. Our refusal to forgive another who has hurt us may be the last bit of control we think we have over them.” (Mickey Anders quote)

Let me offer you a final image to consider as you reflect on forgiveness this week: Imagine collecting the garbage throughout your house and bagging it up. It contains old papers, cans, wrappers, but it also contains left-over chicken about to spoil, the remainder of that cantaloupe that didn't taste quite right, and that old spaghetti from last Monday night – the refuse of a week of living. Then you take that smelly old bag out to the street, stand there for a moment, and then decide you just can't part with it. And you bring it back into the house and throw it in the corner with the previous week's and month's garbage. Can you imagine doing that? No. That is no way to live! But people who refuse to forgive live with just that kind of emotional baggage for years on end! They carry around with them all the spoiled relationships and experiences, all the left-over hurts and mean words said to them, all the refuse of other people's ugliness to them..... they do not bring it to God in prayer. They do not offer it up kneeling at an altar. They do not confront the one who hurt them and offer forgiveness. Nope, they bundle all their emotional trash right back up and keep it right there in the room of their mind and heart with them. Are you doing that? Is that any way to truly live?

You know what I wish would happen? I wish that when our custodian comes in to clean the church on Monday morning, instead of finding forgotten Bibles, umbrellas, bulletins covered with children's drawings, he would find something very different. I wish he'd find there on that seat.... a father's long-held grudge against his son. Back there.... I wish he'd find a woman's profound anger at an ex-husband who sorely mistreated her. Over there, I wish he could find a man's guilt and remorse from an affair he had many years ago. Across the aisle wouldn't it be great if he found the jealousy that threatened a young couple's marriage, here a child's envy of a friend's toy. Oh, how freeing it would be if the custodian found bitterness, pride, fear and doubt – all left behind, to be swept up and thrown away.

And we, the people, pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Let's go back and remind ourselves of our opening thought --- Who do you look like? In order to resemble God, to bear God's family likeness, we need to forgive as God forgives. Can you? Will you?

Quotes from Mickey Anders and from What's So Amazing About Grace? by Philip Yancey