

SUNDAY, March 10, 2024 Lent 4 "Forgive Me-Us"

Psalms 51, Ephesians 4:31-32 Luke 15:11-32 Luke 23:34

"Prayers of the Heart"—what do we mean when we ask/ seek forgiveness? What does it mean to be forgiven in faith/ not in faith? How often do we /should we forgive? Why is it so hard to forgive—and forget? In this season of Lent, we have focused on The Lord's Prayer, Prayers of Lament "Hear My Cry", The Great Thanksgiving Prayer and today our focus is on Forgiveness. Forgiveness is a prayer of the heart because when we open to God our hearts we are getting cleaned up- from the inside out and in our relationships with other people who have been wronged, offended, hurt along with resentment building up.

What is forgiveness? Forgiveness means different things to different people. But in general, it involves an intentional decision to let go of resentment and anger. The act that hurt or offended you might always be with you. But working on forgiveness can lessen that act's grip on you. But what does it mean to forgive and is it always difficult to do so?

Jesus' parable from Luke 15 often called the Prodigal Son, also involves other people, the loving parent and angry sibling. This parable is the third of the "lost" parables shared by Jesus as we remember the 99 sheep who were safe and the one which was not. We also might recall the lost coin of the woman who cleaned her house at night to find it and then welcomed everyone to celebrate that she had found it. This third "lost" story is depicted with the image of the son's return and being embraced by his father but there is more to this story than a hug.

Jesus' parable begins with a family introduction- a man with two sons. The younger son asks the father for his share of the property that he would at some time inherit in the future. The father complies and divides his property. A few days later the younger son gathers his possessions and travels to a distant country and squanders it in dissolute living. All money is gone when a famine hits the county and he is now in need. He goes and works for a pig farmer and is in charge of their feed. The food he gives the pigs is better than what he can afford or even receive. At this he comes to thinking- that his hired hands have more than what he has. And so he decides to go home with a plan in place. He is ready to confess his sins before him and before God and wants to be treated like a hired hand. He starts his journey home. As he approaches home his father sees him, and filled with compassion runs, hugs and kisses him.

The son has his speech ready, but the father tells his servants to get the best robe put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. They are to prepare a feast for this son had now returned. The celebration begins. But not everyone is happy.

The older son was working in the field and when he approaches the house he hears a party going on and asks a servant what was happening. He learns of what has taken place and becomes angry. He refuses to go into the celebration. But the father comes out and pleads with him. The son is angry because the father is celebrating that his brother has returned. The son tells him that he has worked like a slave, never disobeyed, yet he has not received much with which to share with his friends. Yet when he returns you celebrate—He lost everything you gave him! The father then says to the oldest son, you are always with me, and what is mine will be yours. But celebrate because he was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.

The gift of forgiveness is what is shared in this story. The father to the younger son, and the hope that the older son will forgive his brother. But there is also a sense of need for forgiveness by the younger son because responsibilities are recognized and shared. So what is needed for forgiveness? two parties/ individuals who are willing to talk, listen and share openly.

The younger son took on the 4 R's of Forgiveness as presented by Maaria Mahmood and Hadil Nour, two Muslim youth leaders who strive to have young people dive deeply into what forgiveness is about.

1)Responsibility: Accept what has happened and show yourself compassion. The younger son realized what he had done was wrong as he looked at his situation- feeding pigs better food than what he could have for himself. He knew he had lost not only the riches of his father by squandering it away, but the respect of those who knew him.

2)Remorse: Use guilt and remorse as a gateway to positive behaviour change. This younger son felt remorse when he prepared his speech to have his dad receive him only as a hired hand.

3)Restoration: Make amends with whomever you're forgiving, even if it's yourself. The younger son wanted to make it up- but working for the dad and realizing that he would never be in a position of authority on the farm as his brother would inherit everything.

4)Renewal: Learn from the experience and grow as a person. The younger son hoped to begin life again having learned what he had done was wrong—from asking for his inheritance before his father's death, putting the father through humility of selling off the farm and making do with less. He also needed to learn that feeding pigs as a Jewish family was one of the dirtiest jobs and positions he could undertake as pigs were seen as unclean.

So when the younger son prepares his speech for his father, his intentions are good. Yet he forgot about what his brother might do and say. The problem is also that he did not expect that his father would forgive him like he did— in celebration and joy, in respecting him by putting a new mantle and sandals on him and even acknowledging him with a ring—that is a symbol of belonging to the family once again.

Forgiving another person is not easy, but the act of forgiveness and the use of Forgiveness Therapy have been linked to greater feelings of happiness, hopefulness, and optimism. When people enter the process of forgiveness, they can also protect against serious conditions such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. There is also proof that when forgives another, there are benefits for cardiac patients, by significantly lowering their blood pressure..

There are also other benefits of forgiving others including positive psychological developments, which help to reduce anger, repairing valuable relationships, growing as a person, and exercising goodness in and of itself, no matter the response. In addition to personal benefits, modeling forgiveness for others may lead to intergenerational and even societal improvement. But forgiveness and the act of forgiving is a process. It can take time to forgive, and, when this occurs, many who forgive expect the other to be grateful. If the other is not grateful but resists the forgiving, this can be another forgivable situation.

The older son was angry at his father as the father pleaded with him to welcome the younger brother home. The father did not want animosity to grow or build and so he told the older son what he needed to hear. The older son would inherit everything and be in charge when the father died. The younger son would not receive anything nor would he be the one with authority over the whole operation- servants, livestock and fields. The father also needed to hear the thoughts of the older son and through his love, he sought to bring peace in the home.

Forgiveness was what was needed by all. Forgiving is an unconditional act, and it is only complete when the forgiver offers this mercy to the other. But how do we seek forgiveness? What might be the words we share with God? Jesus taught us how—“Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us” in the Lord’s prayer.

As Paul wrote to the Ephesians: “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” But we might ask how often must we forgive another? In Matthew 18:21-22 we read, “Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘I

tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.' " The question of how we share these words is key to understanding our prayers from the heart. All we need to do is confess our sins our wrongdoings to the one we have wronged, this could be another person and/or to God. God will forgive us other people may not, but one must listen to the other who was wronged and learn. Through this process, all will grow and move on.

This is true also when we need to be forgiven and to forgive others. Proverbs 17:9 states that when one forgives, love prospers. But if one dwells on it, there will be division. So what must we do?

Pray- Ask God to guide you when you need forgiveness or to forgive another; confess to God your thoughts and seek wisdom as your faith is tested. God will forgive. And as you pray from your heart, you will feel uplifted, have a clear mind as God creates and re=creates a heart that is clean with the Spirit's guidance. When this occurs there is a restoration of joy and a willingness to try again. Forgiveness comes from your heart = are you willing to do this?

PRAYER

Gracious God of hope and love, we praise you for the gift of forgiveness made possible by Jesus our Saviour. Bless us O God as we offer to you our prayers and as we seek to be forgiven by others and by you. Hear us O God as we share in this time of silence. AMEN