

Sermon: Some Thoughts on Forgiveness

Scriptures: Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 18:21-35

Sunday, September 13, 2020 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

Introduction

I remember several visits with Mr. Jones, some years ago. He was an amazing conversationalist. I literally could step into his living room, sit down, check my watch and say, "hello, Mr. Jones, how are you?" Those would be the last words I would say for the next two hours. He was in his nineties and he had several decade's worth of stories about the oil industry, and life in Ohio when he was just a boy. His parents instructed him to walk to church barefoot and not put on his shoes until he reached the front door so they would not get muddy. I don't remember what happened to his socks. I also found out that he had not been to church in nearly sixty years. I asked why, and he told a story about the time the church building was damaged by a tornado and he got into an argument with another member of the repair crew. Offended, he stepped into his car, drove home and never returned. He never forgave the people who offended him, even though they had left the church years ago.

Set the stage

Forgiveness in the days of Jesus was as much of an issue as it is now, and Peter thought to ask Jesus about it. Mindful of the common teaching of the day, that someone could be forgiven three times, Peter wondered if Jesus would approve if he raised the number to seven. Jesus said even more than that, and told a story of a slave who owed a debt to a king he could never repay. The king forgave him but rescinded the forgiveness when he learned that the slave would not forgive another slave who owed him a minor debt. Jesus concluded that we have been forgiven much, and we should be willing to be very forgiving as well. He echoes Proverbs 21:13, "Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be heard."

the meaning of "forgive"

The word translated "forgive" has numerous meanings, including "to send forth", "cry", "forsake", "leave", "give up". There are others. It's basic meaning is an intensive form of the verb, "to send". To forgive means to "kick something out of your mind and free up brain space for the future that once obsessed on the past" (my definition). It's not always easy to do. I couldn't get Mr. Jones to do it, and sometimes the best some people can do is to give the hurt to God, say that they're willing to forgive but they need to heal, and I think that the Lord understands that,

but forgiveness is the default attitude of a Christian. Ephesians 4:32 says this: "And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you."

Joseph, forgiveness and destiny

Forgiveness can come if you see the Lord at work in your life, even the hard parts of your life. For example, the Biblical story of Joseph is a classic episode of forgiveness. Sold into slavery by his own brothers, Joseph is then falsely accused of criminal behavior and sent to prison with no recourse for justice or no guarantee that he will ever be released. He's there for years, and due to his prophetic ability to interpret dreams he is released and exalted to the position of second in command in Egypt and then he finds that the people coming to him for help during a famine are the same brothers who sold him into slavery, and he gives them a hard time for awhile. But then he reveals himself and forgives them after he hears them admit their guilt and he says that they may have meant harm, but God used it for good.

Application

If people wound you and they apologize and ask for forgiveness, do so. You will be free of burdens that can cause havoc to your future. God in Christ forgave, and He expect us to do the same. Sometimes you have to give wounds and bitterness to the Lord and the people who have harmed you do not know that they have harmed you, or they don't care. Giving that wound to the Lord does not mean that you have to trust that person. Jesus did not trust everybody. It does mean not to seek revenge if justice is denied you.

Conclusion

Peter, when he suggested to Jesus that they ought to forgive people seven times and then have nothing to do with them, was improving the common teaching that three times was enough. Jesus replied that forgiveness is part of the lifestyle of His disciples. We are commanded to forgive. Like Joseph, God can do good even in the wounds people may inflict upon us. Often He is the only one who can do so. We are forgiven, and we are to forgive.