



Holy and Beloved
Colossians 3: 12-17
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Shortly after Larry's death, Paul and I began to talk about forgiveness, that we needed to do a sermon or sermon series on the topic. The reason is because we firmly believe that we cannot move forward as a church unless we can begin to forgive ourselves and each other. But not yet, we said. As the weeks went by, one of us would say, "We still need to talk about forgiveness...but not now. Someday."

I am not sure there is a perfect time to talk about forgiveness. Therefore, I decided to do it today. We need to talk about forgiveness because of what we have gone through as a church. We are experiencing anger and guilt and blame within ourselves and towards others.

For example, there is anger over decisions Session has made in the past. There is blame towards people who have hurt Larry over the years. There is anger because we as leaders didn't do enough to help Larry. And of course, we have guilt within ourselves as we go through the thoughts of "Why didn't I...?" "I should have..." "If only I had...". And so on.

Some of you are ready to hear these words on forgiveness; you are ready to figure out a way to accept forgiveness for yourself and extend it to others. Others of you are not. I must admit that I am not there yet. It kind of feels good to hang on to that anger, doesn't it? It's a way to cope.

If you are not there yet, not even ready to think about forgiveness, hold onto these words I am about to say regarding forgiveness. Hold them lightly, but remember them. Perhaps make a copy of this message, and put it away until the day comes when you are ready to handle it.

Of course, this topic of forgiveness doesn't just apply to our church, we all have people in our lives that we are estranged from and can't forgive. Thus, this topic today applies to every one of us in this room, members of this church and visitors.

We have had some good examples of forgiveness in the news in the last years: the Amish who forgave the man who killed their children. They expressed the forgiveness verbally. They showed their forgiveness by attending the killer's burial service. A year after the murders, the Amish gave money to the killer's widow and three young children.

Or, the young man who killed 9 members of a congregation in Charleston after attending their Bible study. The congregation expressed forgiveness to the killer. One article said, "This act of forgiveness by grandsons and sons, daughters, husbands and relatives of the dead are so out of character, so distant from the 'norm' .that it makes the world stop and pause. Preachers call it 'grace,' which they define as 'unmerited favor.' The accused killer doesn't deserve it, but he is offered forgiveness nonetheless...When the world sees such acts of kindness, it doesn't know what to say."

These are beautiful and difficult examples of extending forgiveness.

As I thought about these examples, I realized they were examples of extending forgiveness to a stranger. But what about extending forgiveness to someone you know? I think it is easier to forgive someone you don't know than it is to forgive a friend, a loved one that has wronged you.

So, I think of Jesus. As he hung from the cross looking down at those who were killing him, he said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Jesus forgiving strangers.

Yeah Jesus, but what about my friends, my family?

Of course, we know the stories...of Peter, one of Jesus' closest friends, denying Jesus not once but three times at a time when Jesus needed him the most. After Jesus rose from the dead, one of the first things Jesus did was go to Peter to extend forgiveness and reinstate him as a leader of the disciples.

Then there was Judas, the friend who turned Jesus in, which led to Jesus' death. The ultimate betrayal. A question we can ask is what would have happened if Judas had not killed himself after turning Jesus in? Would Jesus have done the same thing for Judas as he did with Peter? Could his betrayal be forgiven?

I think so. Jesus would simply be practicing what he taught his disciples all along.

As followers of Christ, we follow his example. And it is hard. How do we do it? How can we look at the friend who has betrayed us, angered us, hurt us, destroyed us, and say I forgive you. And if we do it, what does that look like?

Let's turn to the Word of God for help.

Before we read, let us pray: Stir in us now, Holy Spirit, a willingness to hear, the desire to know the truth and the courage to follow in joyful obedience, that we may be formed by your word into women and men of faith. Amen

Read scripture passage: 2 Colossians 3:12 1-7

James Thurber was a humorist best known for his cartoons and short stories. Thurber tells this story about his grandfather: When he was on his deathbed, Thurber's grandfather was asked by his minister, "Have you forgiven all your enemies?" "Haven't got any," said the old man. "Remarkable!" the minister said. "But how did a red-blooded, two-fisted old battler like you go through life without making any enemies?" Grandfather Thurber explained casually: "I shot 'em."

Well, that is certainly one way to deal with your enemies. I don't recommend it, however.

God knows that as imperfect human beings, it is hard for us to let go of our resentments and hurts. Each of us has names and faces of individuals that we simply cannot imagine being able to forgive.

How can I forgive....and you can fill in the blank.

As you contemplate the act of forgiveness, know this: forgiveness is not forgetting. Forgiveness is not saying, "I don't feel the pain anymore." Rather, forgiving is choosing to not let the anger and hurt control you.

Terry Anderson, a hostage in Lebanon for seven years, tells in his book *Den of Lions* about the healing powers of forgiveness in one's life. He admits that, as a Catholic, he was often told to forgive, but the gospel never became real for him until he began to forgive his captors. Forgiveness doesn't mean there isn't any anger, he said, but is rather letting go of that anger.

And keep in mind, forgiveness is not letting go of the consequences of the behavior. The man who killed the people in Charleston, even though forgiven, will still be in prison. Yet, the Charleston church is not letting his actions control their anger and their lives. Forgiveness gives the ability to move on without bitterness.

How do we do this? How do we move on without bitterness? How do I let go of my own guilt?

In our passage, the Apostle Paul says start with this: remember that you are chosen, holy, dearly loved. In other words, we have this extraordinary starting point – we are valued. This applies not only to you, but also to that person who has hurt you. They too are loved.

We are valued so much that Christ has forgiven us. God did not forgive us because we repented. "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). We ask for forgiveness because God already loves us and has already forgiven us.

We reach out to others with forgiveness because God has already forgiven us. The reality of forgiveness is already ours. We are called into what has already been given. As our passage says, "Forgive as the Lord forgave you." Forgiveness is not just ours, it's theirs, too.

Therefore, since we are chosen, holy, beloved and forgiven, our passage says put on new clothing: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience with each other. We do not merely have these qualities; we live these qualities. They define Christian living. Which leads to forgiving.

You may have noticed that the Bible, especially Jesus, is always calling us to do impossible things— love our enemies and pray for them, bless those who persecute you, pray without ceasing. These are impossible things, but we do these things because God is already doing them.

We try to work at forgiveness in our lives, step-by-step, day-by-day because it has already been achieved for us and given to us freely. So, no more guilt over what you could have done to save Larry's life. Ok? You are forgiven. Then we participate in that free gift by practicing it toward others. We practice it because God has already done it in our lives and in the other person's life.

Forgiveness is often a process. It is not done on command.

I ran into one of our members in the library the other day, and we began to talk about my subject today: forgiveness. She said she had learned the principle of baby steps, a series of affirmations. She said it goes something like this: First you can say, "I am ready and willing to contemplate the possibility of forgiveness."

Then when you are ready, you go to the next step, "I am ready and willing to desire to forgive."

Then when you are ready, you say, "I will forgive.

And finally, "I forgive.

All the while praying for God's help in making these affirmations a part of your heart. This is a process can take weeks or months.

I also find that praying for the person who has wronged you is a way to begin the process of forgiveness. It's amazing what happens to your heart when you pray

for that person who has wronged you. I did this several years ago for a person who had wronged me. It felt like the anger and bitterness that was in my heart was literally breaking apart like shattered glass, and I began to feel the stirring of compassion for that individual. I encourage you to start with that. And if you can't do that, ask God to help you to maybe one day get to that point.

Forgiveness is the way we break the grip resentment has on our hearts.

Forgiveness gives us the ability to move on without bitterness.

Forgiveness is a path to peace and a component of love.

“Over all these virtues put on love” our passage says. This is agape love – unconditional love. Put it on. Forgiveness is a way to practice what has already been given to us. And forgiveness is a way to show the world how to live together.

I know this is hard. So do what Paul says here: let this message of Christ “dwell among you.” In other words, let this message sit with you, inhabit you, stay in you, live in you, abide in you, settle in you. And when you are ready to start the process of forgiveness, God will lead you step by step.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters in Christ, chosen, holy and dearly loved, as the Apostle Paul says may the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. May this message dwell in you richly. May God help you find the way to forgiveness because it has already been given to you. Amen.