

Sunday, March 5 - Why Forgive?

John 8:1-11

Marysville United Methodist Church

Pastor Jenny Smith

It's a common experience in our home to have two beautiful, wonderful, sweet, young children fighting with each other over something very important about four times an hour on average. It could be about any number of important matters - like wanting the blue plate instead of the pink plate, fighting for the Lightning McQueen car when they don't want Mater, or this one from a couple months ago: "Wesley, you wouldn't hold my hand earlier on the stairs and it made me sad. So now I'm doing it to you. I'm not holding your hand."

You know the feeling when there's tension and conflict in the space between two people. It doesn't feel good. We want it to resolve. But we also have lots of other feelings mixed in there. "They hurt me! They should apologize first! I want them to hurt like I do. I'll just wait until they make the first move. I can hold a grudge for a loooooong time."

With our young children, we let them know they can apologize when they feel ready. It usually only lasts 10 seconds to about 5 minutes at this age. I ask them if they're ready to start over. And I watch their little shoulders sink and see the relief cross their face. "I'm sorry, Wesley. I'm sorry, Beh-beh." Grace. Forgiveness. Letting the other person off the hook. Letting ourselves off the hook for making a mistake.

Powerful stuff. We just want to start over.

"Forgiveness is nothing less than the way we heal the world. We heal the world by healing each and every one of our hearts. The process is simple, but it is not easy (Tutu)." We are setting aside six weeks to journey deep into the heart of forgiveness. As we remove one brick at a time from the walls we've built around our hearts, let us not be afraid of what awaits us. It might simply be a resurrection.

Today, we'll reflect a moment on the story of Jesus, some stones and a woman caught in adultery. We'll talk about mirrors, why we would want to forgive, what forgiveness is not and what it is. Then we get to celebrate at the table of forgiveness today.

Can you picture the drama of this story? A woman brought before the crowd. Jesus asking some pointed questions of the religious leaders. One by one they hightail it out of there. The woman is both forgiven and encouraged to move in a new direction with her life.

Verse 7 - "Whoever hasn't sinned should throw the first stone," is Jesus holding up a mirror to the religious leaders. "Okay folks. May all the perfect people step up and take the first throw." One by one by one, people turn and walk away.

Hold up a mirror.

How do you feel about mirrors? Do you like what you see when you look in one? Do you quickly avert your eyes? There have been seasons in my life where I looked into my eyes and only saw fuzzy clouds. It was a rough season where I was clearly avoiding parts of myself. Then there are seasons I've looked into my eyes and seen deep, calm and clear waters. There's nothing to fear inside. Even in my brokenness. With Jesus, it all belongs and is welcomed.

When it comes to forgiveness, Jesus holds up a mirror to each of us and says, "Are you perfect? If so, go ahead, withhold forgiveness. Don't let them off the hook. Make them pay. Make them feel the

hurt and pain they caused you.” And one by one, we turn and walk away. For we are not perfect. We hurt others just as they hurt us.

Why would we want to forgive people who've hurt us? The anger runs deep. It's built up over time. They don't deserve grace - being let off the hook, we want revenge, retaliation, we want them to hurt like they hurt us. It's incredibly hard to forgive people.

Some of you may be motivated to consider forgiveness when we are reminded by many medical and psychological studies that show an increased risk for anxiety, depression, insomnia, high blood pressure, ulcers, migraines, backaches, heart attacks, & cancer when we hang on to anger and resentment. When we live in a constant state of stress, we can damage our hearts, our bodies and our soul.

Yes, we should want to forgive people. But sometimes we have assumptions about forgiveness that aren't quite true.

Forgiveness is **not** saying it's okay that they hurt you.

It's not waiting for them to admit, confess or apologize. That day may never come.

It's not eliminating consequences or preventing justice.

It's not forgetting what happened.

It's not necessarily reconciliation.

It is not dependent on the action of others.

Once we clear up some of that, then we might be curious about what forgiveness really is.

Forgiveness means setting people free. Rob Bell says it this way, “Forgiveness is setting people free all over the place and realizing you're one of them.”

Forgiveness is a process. Something we enter into. Sometimes we do this quickly. Sometimes it takes **a long time**.

Forgiving is passing along to others what you have received. Someone has let you off the hook at some point. You messed up and they could have held that over you for years, but they didn't. Now it's your opportunity to pass that along to someone who has wronged you.

And this may mean forgiving yourself. Letting yourself off the hook. Some of us are harder on ourselves than anyone else could ever be.

The good news is there's an art to letting yourself and others off the hook. It's a muscle we can strengthen.

Forgiveness is easier to practice when we realize no person will always stand in the camp of perpetrator or victim. In some situations we have been harmed, and in others we have harmed. Sometimes in arguments with people we love, we occupy both camps in the same conversation! (Tutu)

There's a Spanish story of a father and son who had become estranged. The son ran away, and the father set off to find him. He searched for months to no avail. Finally, in a last desperate effort to find him, the father put an ad in a Madrid newspaper. The ad read: Dear Paco, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father. On Saturday, 800 Pacos showed up, looking for forgiveness and love from their fathers (Bits & Pieces, October 15, 1992, pp. 13.).

Until we can forgive the person who harmed us, that person will hold the keys to our happiness; that person will be our jailor. When we forgive, we become our own liberators. We don't forgive to help the other person. We don't forgive for others. **We forgive for ourselves (Tutu). So that we can be free. And become whole in Christ.**

Forgiveness is setting someone free. And realizing it's you. Amen.