

SERMON – 09/07/08
“THE F-WORD: What Forgiveness Is... and Isn’t”
Luke 15:11-32

“What does it mean to forgive? What does it mean to be forgiven? And how can we, as Christians, possibly live this out in a world where we are so frequently hurt?”

- These, and other questions, will be the driving force behind our new sermon series called “THE F-WORD: Wrestling with Forgiveness.”
- I truly believe that God may use this series in a powerful way over the next 5 weeks...
 - Because I dare say that there’s not a single person here in this room today who hasn’t, over the course of their lifetime, either:
 - a) Hurt someone... or
 - b) Been hurt by someone...
 - And the scars still remain... don’t they?
- Here’s how we’re going to move forward together...
 - Today we’ll be looking at **what forgiveness is... and what it isn’t**.
 - Next Sunday, we’ll dig into **WHY we forgive** – how is forgiveness shaped by our Christian faith...
 - On Sept. 21, we’ll tackle the difficult subject of **forgiving the HARD STUFF**... the really big wounds that we encounter... the things that are hard to let go of!
 - Our 4th week examines the question of whether we’re called to “Forgive & Forget”... or if there may be some other alternative?
 - And we’ll finish this series on the first Sunday in October by looking at what it means to **Forgive ourselves**... which could quite possibly be the most important message many of us need to hear!
 - We’re glad that you’re here today... and encourage you to invite others to join you along the way.

There are well over 100 passages in the Bible that use the word “FORGIVE” in some form or another... so you can imagine that it’s quite a task as to how to approach this subject in this series.

- I decided to start with a story that's probably very familiar to many of us... the story that's come to be known as "The Prodigal Son"...
 - If you have your Bibles, please turn with me back to Luke 15...
 - (v.11ff.) *"Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living."*
 - It begins as a simple story about a man and his two sons... but soon becomes something altogether different.
- In Middle Eastern culture, love & respect for one's parents is paramount...
 - In fact, the 5th of the 10 Commandments reminded God's people to *"Honor your father & mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you."*
 - Now any Middle Eastern son would have known back then, that they were, indeed, entitled to a share of their father's inheritance.
 - It wouldn't have been a 50/50 split, mind you... the older brother was entitled to a much larger portion...
 - But younger sons still would receive a share of the family inheritance.
 - The only "minor detail," of course, was that one's father would have to be DEAD. Because... well... that's how inheritances work!
 - So when the younger son says to his father, "Give me the share of the property that will belong to me," he's not just asking for an advance on his future, to get himself started...
 - NO... he's literally saying to his father, "Why don't you just drop dead right now?!?!"
 - In some cultures, that would have earned him a slap on the face... his mouth washed out with soap... or even worse!
 - Deuteronomy 21:18-21 says, *"If someone has a stubborn & rebellious son who will not obey his father & mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, then his father & his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the*

elders of his town at the gate of that place. They shall say to the elders of his town, 'This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.' Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel will hear, and be afraid."

- (Ya think?)
- This younger son had crossed the line... he had disrespected his father in a way that was... well, quite frankly... unforgiveable.
- But the father in this story acquiesces... he gives his son what he's asking for... and liquidates a portion of the family assets... and hands them over to the young whippersnapper.
 - You can bet that caused quite a commotion in the village they were living.
 - What the son asked for was unheard of. What the father gave was even more so!
 - So off went Junior to seek his fame & fortune... in some distant land.
 - And before he knew what hit him, Jesus tells us, the lad had squandered **all he had**... every last cent, shilling, drachma, zloty, farthing, peso, ruble, frank or euro... (depending on where he was, of course!).
 - Talk about a no-good, ungrateful, reckless & rebellious punk!?!)

As I've prepared for this sermon series, there have been a couple of books that have been invaluable:

- *The Art of Forgiving: When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How* by Lewis B. Smedes...
- *Total Forgiveness* by R.T. Kendall...
 - I read a few others... but these shone through as the most helpful for me.
 - Over the next 5 weeks, I'll be borrowing from them quite extensively!

Smedes, in his book, reminds us that just as we don't use surgery on every unwanted wound... there are also wounds for which forgiving is precisely the wrong remedy.

- It has been said that "Whoever forgives everything, forgives nothing."

- Forgiving is for the wounds that stab at our souls... for wrongs that we cannot put up with... ever... from anyone.
- When we forgive people for things that do not need forgiving, we dilute the power... spoil the beauty... and interrupt the healing of forgiveness.
- So what is it precisely that we should forgive?
 - We forgive **persons**, not institutions... it has to be a specific individual in a one-on-one relationship.
 - We forgive persons for **what they do**, not for what they are...
 - People do not wrong us by being liars; they wrong us by lying about us. They do not wrong us by being untrustworthy; they wrong us by betraying our trust.
 - We forgive people for what they do to **seriously wound us**... minor inconveniences or misunderstandings, though frustrating, really aren't things that need to be forgiven.
 - We forgive persons for what they do to **wrong us** when they wound us...
 - Smedes makes the distinction between wounds that were an accident... and wounds that were the result of an intentional wrong.
- To qualify for forgiving, we only need to meet the following requirements:
 - We need to bear the wounds ourselves...
 - We need to know we have been wronged...
 - We need to have an inner push to forgive...
 - That inner push may seem like the hardest part of the three... but that's exactly the part that comes from God!
 - It can simply start by "**wanting to**," even though you may not know exactly how!
 - You see, forgiving is all about HEALING WOUNDS!
 - Our wounds qualify us to forgive the way a broken leg qualifies us for entry into the Emergency Room...

R.T. Kendall, in his book *Total Forgiveness*, makes a wonderful list of what forgiveness IS... and what it ISN'T...

- (And as I share his insights with you, see if you're as surprised about what you hear as I was when I first read it!)

- First, what forgiveness IS NOT...
 - It is not **approval** of what someone has done to you...
 - It is not **excusing** what they did...
 - It is not **justifying** what they did...
 - It is not **pardoning** what they did (it doesn't release them from the consequences of their actions)...
 - It is not **reconciliation** (that may happen down the road... but it requires the participation of TWO people... and that's not always possible, or desired!)...
 - It is not **denying** what they did...
 - Nor is it **blindness** to what happened...
 - It is not **forgetting** (we'll discuss this more in week 4 of our series)...
 - It is not **refusing to take the wrong seriously**...
 - And it's definitely not **pretending we're not hurt**...
- What does Dr. Kendall say forgiveness IS?
 - It's **being aware of what someone has done, and still forgiving them**...
 - We often want those who have hurt us to not only suffer... but to know they are suffering precisely because of it!
 - We have to let that go for true forgiveness...
 - It's **choosing to keep no record of wrongs**... Kendall believes many marriages would experience overnight healing if both spouses would stop pointing the finger at the other...
 - It's **refusing to punish**... if we're lucky, we can get close to justice. But there is never closure with vengeance...
 - Forgiveness involves **not telling (others)** what someone did to wound you.
 - This is a difficult one, isn't it?! But talking about how you've been wounded is often done to hurt that person's credibility or reputation – which is really just another way of trying to punish them!
 - It's being **merciful**...
 - It's a **graciousness** that's shown by what you DON'T say about someone, even when what you could say would be true!

- Kendall remarks that self-righteous people have a hard time being gracious, because they so often insist on wanting “the truth,” no matter what the cost.
- Forgiveness is an **inner condition**...
- This is an important piece to understand... reconciliation is not an essential tool for forgiveness. Remember, reconciliation takes both parties.
- But if one truly forgives another from the heart, it doesn't matter whether the other wants or is willing to reconcile.
- It's the **absence of bitterness**... this is another key point! Bitterness is one of the primary ways we grieve the Holy Spirit.
- *(Eph.4:30-32) “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage & anger, brawling & slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God has forgiven you.”*
- Bitterness manifests itself in many ways: losing your temper... high blood pressure... irritability... sleeplessness... obsession with getting even... depression... isolation... a constant negative perspective... and generally feeling unwell.

Let's go back to our story from Luke 15...

- At some point, that no-good son “came to his senses,” Jesus tells us...
 - He had squandered all of his inheritance... was homeless & desperately hungry...
 - So he decided he'd go back home and beg his father to take him back as a servant... considering the fact that he'd pretty much kissed goodbye ever being able to return as a son again!
 - So he put together this heartfelt confession (*v. 18ff.*) *“Father, I have sinned against heaven & before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”*
 - It's the first decent thing the kid's said in all the parable!
- But after the long return journey... as he reaches the outskirts of town... Jesus tells us (*v.20*) *“While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran & put his arms around (his son) and kissed him.”*

- The Father in this parable is the true focus... just by his actions you can tell that he's already been able to forgive his son for the ways he wounded him.
- But not everyone in the family is as ready to forgive...
- Fast forward to later that evening...
- The Father has called all of the town over to the house for a BBQ celebration in honor of his son's return! Reconciliation abounds...
- Until the older brother comes in from working the fields...
- He hears the sounds of a party... sees all the camels parked in the front driveway... smells the hamburgers on the grill...
- And when one of the servants tells him WHY the party has started... what the occasion is... THE OLDER SON FREAKS OUT!
- He absolutely loses it!!!
- He refuses to go inside... and he causes a huge scene as his father has to leave the party & come outside to plead with him.
- *(v.29) "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"*
- Can you sense the bitterness? It's oozing with it, isn't it?!
- This son, it appears, is the one who is really "lost," not his wayward little brother.
- His father reminds him that when he divided his property & gave his brother his share, the rest of the property immediately went into the control of the other son!
- Everything on the family farm was already his. EVERYTHING!
- But he's still too bitter to enjoy it.
- And he's nowhere near being able to forgive his brother.
- How sad that his brother's actions from so long ago continue to have a powerful sway over his life & spirit...
 - Robert Farrar Capon, in his book *Between Noon & Three: Romance, Law & the Outrage of Grace* writes this:

- “Parables are told only because they are true, not because the actions of the characters in them can be recommended for imitation. Good Samaritans are regularly sued. Fathers who give parties for wayward sons are rightly rebuked. Employers who pay equal wages for unequal work have labor-relations problems. And any Shepherd who makes a practice of leaving 99 sheep to chase after a lost one quickly goes out of the sheep-ranching business. The parables are true only because they are like what God is like, not because they are models for us to copy. It’s simply a fact that the one thing we dare not under any circumstances imitate is the only thing that can save us.”
- What does that mean? That means I’m not saying that all of us simply need to act like the Father in today’s parable, and everything will turn out just perfect...
 - Not at all...
 - But I am suggesting, if we’ll choose to listen, that this may very well be the key to forgiveness... understanding WHY it is that we forgive...
 - The story of the Prodigal Son isn’t really a story about a lost son... it’s really a story about his amazing father...
 - Praise God for OUR amazing Father... and that’s precisely where we’ll pick up **NEXT WEEK!**
 - In the meantime... Lord have mercy! AMEN.