

SERMON – 09/21/08

“THE F-WORD: Forgiving the Hard Stuff”

“Have you always wanted to tell someone something, but didn't know how to do it? Well, this is the perfect site for you.

- (This website) is your home for all of your revenge needs.
 - So you never had a chance to get revenge on your ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend?
 - Your current spouse lied to you when he said that he would never cheat on you?
 - Well, you know the saying "Don't get mad, get even".
- Get Revenge On People Who Have Done You Wrong!
 - We stand ready to help you get revenge and let these individuals know exactly what you think of them - your identity is never divulged. . . NEVER!”

This is just one example of the man “revenge websites” I found on the internet this past week.

- Some of the services were kind of funny & harmless...
 - Like certificates of “unappreciation”...
 - Fake parking tickets with insults printed on them...
 - A dozen dead roses (or a dozen dead stems – “when he doesn’t even deserve dead flowers!”)...
 - Fake “winning” lottery tickets...
- Others were more annoying...
 - Like signing a person up to receive unsolicited junk mail & spam...
 - Or posting an embarrassing picture of the person online...
- One sight had 42 ideas for how to get back at an ex-partner... including such categories as: “his phone, his email, his manhood, his clothes, his car, his house, his mail, superglue, his body & his computer”...
- Then there were the more serious revenge “services” out there:
 - Using false documentation to apply for numerous credit cards – an act that is detrimental to someone’s credit score...
 - A way to have someone’s bank accounts closed remotely...
 - Sending fake forged checks back to someone’s employer... so it looks like they were forging checks to themselves... which will get them fired!
 - Hiring an agency to break up your ex’s new relationship – no questions asked!

I was pretty shocked at what I found online this week... but it told me one thing, for sure: THERE ARE A LOT OF HURTING PEOPLE IN THE WORLD.

I'd like you to watch the opening few minutes of Pastor Rob Bell's Nooma® video called "Luggage"...

- [Video clip]

"... It's like everyone I know has wounds. And some of them are just small & kind of petty, and it's like, 'You know, you've just got to get over it.' But for a lot of people, they're big, serious & deep wounds. I was talking with this girl the other day, a friend of mine, and partway through our conversation she says to me, "You know, I was raped." It's like we could speculate why all this happens and why people do these kinds of things, and we could try and figure it out forever, but I think what we want is to be free from all this. We want to be alive & healthy & whole. I mean, I don't want what somebody else did to me to determine what my life is going to be like, do you? 'Cuz sometimes it's big things & sometimes it's small things... and you try not to think about it, but then, if you're like me you start thinking about it more than ever. You want to put it behind you, but how? Or you think you're over it and you're going to be okay, and then you either run into the person or something that reminds you of them & what they did to you, and it all comes back... and the wound is reopened... and it hurts more than ever. And then it becomes a day or week or 10 years later, and now it's become a part of you. It's like you can't shake it and can't leave it behind... and then what happens is that revenge becomes our only hope. And we aren't free."

- Everyone has wounds... and some of us have some really deep ones.
 - That's what today's message is about... "Forgiving the Hard Stuff".
 - This is the 3rd week in our current sermon series entitled: 'THE F-WORD: Wrestling with Forgiveness'
 - If you missed either of the first two weeks, you're invited to find them online at our church's website... www.aumc.us

Life is unfair. In his book *The Art of Forgiving*, Lewis Smedes states that there are only two genuine options for responding to a personal injury that we did not deserve: vengeance or forgiveness. Any other way of responding is really a denial.

- Vengeance is a passion to get even.
 - But the reason "getting even" doesn't make life more fair, is that it never actually happens. It can't!

- The reason we cannot get even is that the victim & offender never weigh pain on the same scale... one of them is always behind in the exchange of pain.
- That's why there can be incredibly long feuds between the Hattfields/McCoys... Hutus/Tutsis... Bloods/Crips... and no progress is ever made towards true healing.
- If we have to get even, we are doomed to exchange wound for wound... blood for blood... pain for pain, forever. Perpetual pain.
- Plus, there's a spiritual dimension to our quest for revenge. As Rob Bell put it, "Revenge, on the deepest level, is like saying to God, 'I don't trust you to deal with this, because I don't know what you're going to do... I want to be in control of this. I actually think I can do your job better than you can.'"
- Forgiveness is no "magic wand" or guarantee that things will suddenly be "more fair" between two people... but it does open the window of opportunity.
 - Revenge always makes things more unfair than before!
 - Forgiveness, at least, leaves room for healing.
 - And sometimes... maybe **most of the time**... the one who benefits from forgiveness is the one WHO DOES THE FORGIVING!
 - Forgiving is a healing action. And we all need to be healed, don't we?!?

Our scripture reading for today came from the very end of a quite lengthy section of the book of *Genesis*... it's the saga of Joseph... and if you have your Bibles with you today, I invite you to open with me to the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis...

- The last 13 chapters of *Genesis* contain the story Joseph...
 - It all starts in chapter 37... where we meet a scrawny, 17-year-old kid... who's a shepherd... and a snitch!
 - The very first action we see him take is to tell on his older brothers. The storyteller says he "brought a bad report" about his bothers to his father.
 - (v.3ff.) "*Now Israel (Jacob) loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves...*" (other translations say "a coat of many colors!")... "*But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.*"
 - Not only that... but we soon discover that Joseph has been gifted by God with the ability to dream & interpret dreams.

- The only problem is that he dreams about his entire family bowing down to him in submission... how surprising that his big brothers don't jump up with joy upon hearing that!
- The reality is, this young kid, though blessed by God... has a lot of issues to deal with... and a lot of growing up to do!
- This is an amazing story, and I commend it to you to read on your own later today... or sometime this week... but allow me to give you the "Cliff's Notes" version of what takes place between chapters 37 and 45:
 - His brothers, sick of Joseph's arrogance & attitude, decided to kill him... but this plan for murder morphs into slave trafficking, as they instead sell him to some traveling Ishmaelites.
 - A bloody & shredded robe is all their father needs to believe his favorite son is dead... and the brothers are off scot free (or so they think).
 - Once in Egypt, the Ishmaelites sell him to the captain of Pharaoh's guard... a man named Potiphar.
 - Potiphar puts him to work as a household servant, and before too long Joseph is promoted to overseeing the entire household!
 - It's "Mrs. Potiphar," who causes a problem... when she falsely accuses Joseph of rape, after her rebuffed her own sexual advances!
 - Though nobody would have known, Joseph did not yield to temptation... and for that he ended up in prison. Go figure.
 - After a while in prison, Joseph's gift for dream interpretation came in handy... as he helped two of the Pharaoh's cabinet members...
 - But their promises of remembering him to Pharaoh were forgotten... and Joseph stayed another two more years in prison for a crime he didn't commit.
 - Finally, the Pharaoh himself had a befuddling dream... and word leaked out that a certain prisoner might be able to help.
 - And help is just what Joseph did! The Pharaoh was so impressed, he freed Joseph & made him his right-hand man... in charge of a nationwide famine prevention program.
 - During the next seven years of abundance, Joseph helped stockpile food for the nation... so when the seven years of famine hit (which is what the Pharaoh had dreamed), they were prepared.
- Joseph had a lot he could have been bitter about...
 - His brothers had treated him cruelly...
 - He had been falsely accused & unjustly imprisoned...

- He had been repeatedly forgotten & left to die...
- It was almost as if God himself was against Joseph... or so it must have seemed at the time.
- But somehow, somehow, God used those many years of pain & frustration to change the heart of this “formerly scrawny little tattletale.”
- So when Joseph’s brothers made their trek from the land of Canaan to Egypt, because they heard Egypt had somehow been prepared for the famine, Joseph was a new man!
- But, of course, they didn’t know the Pharaoh’s right-hand man was their little brother at all!
- A lot takes place between chapters 42-45... but in the end, all of his brothers, save one, were there in Joseph’s presence at his royal residence.
 - He’s been questioning & interrogating his brothers in front of his entourage & through an interpreter... and they’re still clueless as to his true identity...
 - Finally he cannot take it any longer:
 - *(45:1ff.) “Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, ‘Send everyone away from me.’ So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?’ But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.”*
 - R.T. Kendall, in his book *Total Forgiveness*, suggests that Joseph is a wonderful example for us when it comes to learning to forgive people – especially some of the hard stuff in our lives!
- The first lesson we can learn from Joseph about forgiveness, is **not to let anyone know what someone said about you or did to you...**
 - Whatever hurt or pain you’re carrying from your past... don’t broadcast it to others!
 - (Note: As I said earlier in the series, if some kind of illegal or abusive act has taken place... by all means, alert the authorities! But this lesson is for down the road – when you’re ready to start forgiving!)
 - Joseph waited until everyone was out of the room (even the interpreter) before he revealed himself to his brothers.
 - Why? He didn’t want a single person to know what his brothers had done to him 22 years before!
 - God can be a model for us here... can you imagine how you’d feel if God disclosed to everyone else what he knows about you?! (I’d be embarrassed, that’s for sure... I don’t know about the rest of you!)

- Why do we tell others? Well, if it's beyond therapeutic reasons to someone who'll never repeat it, it's usually because we still want to punish the person who hurt us.
- Our divine challenge, however, is to stop that kind of behind-the-back talk... no matter how true it may be.
- Second, **don't allow anyone to be afraid of you or intimidated by you...**
 - How did Joseph finally reveal himself to his brothers? Not out of a threatening position of authority... but through his tears & compassion!
 - If someone who has hurt us (and knows they've hurt us) freezes in anxiety when they see us approach... we may say to ourselves, 'Good! They should be afraid of me... considering what they did!'
 - But that only shows there's still bitterness in our hearts.
 - When Joseph saw that his brothers were "dismayed" (another translation says "terrified" at his presence)... the storyteller says this:
 - (45:4) *"Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come closer to me.' And they came closer..."*
 - Joseph didn't want his brothers to be afraid of him... and he asked them to come closer, because he wanted to embrace them out of love!
 - He could have kept them at a distance... kept them in awe of all he'd accomplished & how powerful he'd become...
 - But no, he wanted intimacy... that's the kind of relationship Jesus wants with each of us, too. 1 John 4:18 reminds us that "There is no fear in love."
- The 3rd lesson in forgiveness we can learn from Joseph is that we should want (those who have hurt us) to **forgive themselves & not feel guilty.**
 - Sometimes we say, in effect, to those who have hurt us, "I forgive you for what you did... but I hope you feel really bad about it!"
 - We love to punish people by making them feel guilty. That shows we still want to see others punished... and it shows our fear!
 - But when our fear is gone, the desire to see others punished goes along with it.
 - (v.4ff.) *"He said, 'I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life...'"*
 - To ease their minds, Joseph gave an explanation for his suffering... "God used me to help save lives!"

- This is a big challenge for many of us...to let go of the frequently-used weapon known as “the guilt trip.”
- Fourth, Joseph teaches that we should **let those who have hurt us ‘save face.’**
 - To forgive from the heart, there is little room for self-righteousness...
 - We are able to forgive, as we learned last week, precisely because we have already been forgiven so much by God... and we know what we’re capable of!
 - When we’re indignant over someone else’s wickedness, says Kendall, there’s a real possibility that either we’re being self-righteous... or we have no objectivity about ourselves!
 - When we truly see ourselves as we are, we will recognize that we’re just as capable of committing any sin as anyone else. We’re saved only by God’s grace.
 - Joseph knew his past. He had had a lot of time in prison to think about where he’d been...
 - Now, when it was time to reveal himself to his brothers he reminded them again, (v.7ff.): *“God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.”*
 - Letting his brothers save face wasn’t just some polite gesture... Joseph was telling his brothers the truth! God had meant it for good. God had sent him to Egypt with a purpose in mind.
 - It was the apostle Paul who said, in the 8th chapter of his letter to the church in Rome, *“We know all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”*
 - This doesn’t say that everything that happens is good... but that God can use all things that happen to us... and turn them around for good!
 - The question is, do we believe this? If we do, it makes forgiveness a whole lot easier!
- The 5th lesson we can learn from Joseph is to **protect those who have hurt us from their greatest fear...**
 - What was his brothers’ greatest fear? That they would now have to return to Canaan & tell their ‘aged’ father the truth about what they had done 22 years ago!
 - Their worst nightmare was that he’d find out about their treacherous deception.
 - Joseph knew his forgiveness of them was utterly worthless to them if they had to tell the whole truth to their father...
 - So Joseph instructed his brothers exactly what to say (and what not to say) to Dad...
 - (v.9) *“Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay...’”*

- He goes on to instruct them to tell their father where they'll settle... and how Joseph will provide for them... and that it really IS Joseph in the flesh... and how honored he is in Egypt.
- Notice he says nothing about HOW it is that he's alive... that he wasn't really eaten by wolves (or sold off by his brothers!). None of that is necessary.
- Kendall writes, "Sin that is under the blood of our sovereign Redeemer does not need to be confessed to anyone but God. To hold another person in perpetual fear by threatening, 'I'll tell on you,' will quickly bring down the wrath of God.
- Joseph protected his brothers from their greatest fear... that was part of their forgiveness by him!
- Sixth, committing to forgive someone is a **lifelong commitment...**
 - It means that we forgive not just once... but over and over and over... as long as we live (and we may have to practice it every day of our lives, as well!).
 - In our bible story, the brothers return to Canaan & bring back the whole clan... including beloved father, Jacob.
 - By chapter 50, Jacob has died after living under Joseph's care & protection. Now the brothers suddenly get a little nervous.
 - (50:15ff.) *"Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?'"*
 - So they make up a phony death-bed story about how their father begged Joseph to forgive his brothers all of the wrongs they committed against him.
 - When Joseph heard this from his brothers, he wept! He couldn't believe they still doubted him.
 - He could see that they lived in the fear that one day he, the Egyptian Prime Minister, would use his power to take vengeance on them.
 - Kendall writes, "I must never tell what I know... cause my offenders to feel fear... make them feel guilty... hope they'll lose face... or reveal their most devastating secrets. And I must keep this up as long as I live.
- Finally, **we need to pray for our offenders to be blessed.**
 - This could very well be the most difficult part of forgiveness... and yet, the most like Jesus, too!
 - Jesus told his disciples, *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..."* (Matt. 5:43-44).
 - Jesus wouldn't want us to pray: "Lord, deal with them!" or "God, get them for what they did to me!" or even, "Father, I commend them to you!"
 - NO... Jesus said pray FOR them... not pray about them...

- To truly pray for the one who hurt you means to pray that they will be blessed... that God will show favor to them instead of punish them... that they will prosper in every way!
- Personally, this is the lesson I've just had to learn... as I was preparing this series, I read this part in Kendal's book, and was convicted.
- Someone I considered a good friend hurt me deeply about 10 years ago... and while I thought I'd come to forgive them... I realized I hadn't ever prayed for their blessing.
- I thought it was good enough to not want to wring their neck every time I saw this person.
- But to pray for their blessing? It's a hard thing to do! But I believe it will ultimately lead to a deeper healing in my life!
- But Kendall gives us one word of caution: Never go to a person we have forgiven and say, "I forgive you!" This will be counterproductive every time unless we know that person is yearning for our forgiveness.
- Otherwise, we might get a reply of, "For what?" Kendall says that 9 out of 10 people he's had to forgive sincerely didn't feel as though they'd done anything wrong.
- It's up to us to forgive them from our heart... then keep quiet. God knows. And God can provide the healing in our lives!

Because that's really the bottom line, my friends... forgiveness is HEALING... and most of the time the healing is for those who have been hurt... those who need to forgive... and not necessarily the ones we need to forgive.

- Kendall said one other thing that caught my interest...
 - That the greater the sin we must forgive... the deeper the hurt & pain that has been inflicted upon us... the greater the measure of the Holy Spirit that will come to us in our forgiveness!
 - I know that some of you here today have been through some painful stuff in your past... some horrible & traumatic experiences.
 - And although God didn't cause them to happen to you... God can fill your hurt & pain with an equal measure of His Holy Spirit!
 - If you've ever come to the point where you think to yourself, "I could never forgive that"... you have a unique opportunity that others may never get! You have the opportunity to receive the power of God's Spirit in as equally real & tangible way – as you forgive!!
- When we forgive... we love... and when we love, not only does God's light shine upon us... but God sends us a peace that passes all understanding...
 - For God so much desires that we live in health & wholeness, my friends...

- Vengeance, bitterness & resentment do not lead to healing...
 - The hard stuff, especially, needs the healing that only forgiveness can give.
 - Next week we'll look at what the future holds in a relationship that we've released to forgiveness...
 - Do we have to "forgive and forget"?
 - Does everything have to be "as it was" before the injury?
 - Or are there other options?
 - I hope you'll join us next week as we look at this together...
 - In the meantime... let us accept the "Healing Rain" that God provides... for our deepest pains!
- AMEN.