

This morning I want to talk about the struggle of forgiving people who have hurt us.

OPENING PRAYER

READ Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar- Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." 20 Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

My best friend betrayed me.

My son is a drug addict and he stole \$5000 from me with my ATM card.

My mom was trying to cross the street with her walker and a car hit her and sped away.

Have you experienced anything like this, maybe worse?

Jesus said to Peter,

MATTHEW 16:19: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

This message is about forgiveness, about forgiving people who've hurt you and those whom you love. This is a gift, to be able to forgive on another.

Indeed, the gift of forgiveness of sins is rich, it's dynamic, it pervades every part of our worship and our life in Christ.

In practical terms this gift comes in two parts. The first part is the gift God gave to the church through the office of pastoral ministry. That is to say, our pastor forgives us as a community during worship when he proclaims the absolution of our sins after our general confession.

In addition, the pastor offers individual absolution, speaking on God's behalf. This happens, for instance, when you are in your pastor's office and you confess to him some wretched thing that you did, and he says, "I forgive you for your sin in the name of Jesus Christ."

The second part of this gift is the opportunity we have as individuals to forgive other people who have hurt us.

This gift of forgiveness is what Jesus was talking about when he said, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

In the Catechism we call this the Office of the Keys, as in, "the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven."

Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 6:15? **"if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."**

Too consider what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount:

MATTHEW 6:14-15: "...if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, 15 but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Jesus was talking to people who've already been forgiven. So He was saying, forgive just as you've been forgiven, otherwise you're denying God's grace which already flows through you!

There's also this dialogue between Jesus and Peter:

MATTHEW 18:21-22: "...Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy- seven times."

"7" is God's number! It's the number of completion.

So not only must we forgive other people, but our forgiveness of them must be unlimited; it must be unconditional! That's what these words mean.

Let's return to my opening fictional illustrations:

- My friend who betrayed me
- My drug addicted son who stole from me
- The person who ran over my mom

Can I forgive these people? I must forgive these people! For the sake of my relationship with God, I must forgive them! That's what Jesus was saying.

But what about what we heard in Matthew 16 about withholding forgiveness? Jesus said, "whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven...."

This does NOT mean that as individuals we get to pick and choose what is forgivable and what is not. It means that as a church, we make that call.

For example, if a person cheats on their spouse and it becomes public knowledge to the church, and if that person refuses to repent for their sin, then they will be excommunicated. That's what it means to "bind on earth." Nonetheless, the person who was hurt must still forgive the sinner.

Thus the friend who betrayed, the thieving, drug-addled son, the hit and run driver, I must forgive them all.

I began by talking about how like human relationships, God has expectations concerning His relationship with us. However, unlike the expectations we have with human relationships, God's expectations of us are linked to the gifts He's given us. God's expectation of us that we would forgive one another is rooted in the work of His Son Jesus on the Cross. In other words, God forgave us for our sins so that we could and would forgive one another!

I think our forgiveness of one another is the single most important thing we can do to push the ball forward in our Christian discipleship. That is, when we grow in our ability to forgive others we become more like Jesus.

The first step in growing in this discipleship is to consider how the Lord has forgiven us. Think about it for a moment. If we don't understand Christ's forgiveness in our own hearts, how can we give this gift to others?

Here's a personal example. A person whom I had thought was a very dear friend betrayed me, humiliated me, in a group of other people. It was not a small thing. It was so bad I was emotionally devastated, and I was so angry I wanted to punch them in the throat!

That was the end of that relationship. My heart turned against that person I hated them so much. Indeed, I wished for them the same pain they'd caused me, and more. And I closed the door on that relationship forever.

I hate to admit it but it took me some time to forgive that person. This is how it came about.

Over a number of years I had completely forgotten about that person. I'd gotten on with life as normal. However, one day after an angry outburst I had with another person, I began to reflect on where that outburst had come from. My reaction had been over the top, out of proportion with the offense.

And I realized that I was angry most of my waking hours. I'm not a screamer. But there was a very short fuse underneath this peaceful exterior you see.

And then I saw it. For far too long I had carried around in my heart the bitterness that had been planted there by the betrayal I had experienced in that old relationship.

This was not an easy exercise. But I realized that this old anger had abscessed in my heart. It was affecting everything and everyone in my life.

As I reflected on how to get myself out of that funk, I thought about that other person, and I wondered how they were doing. I shocked myself as I thought about how I cared for them now. I thought about how they must be feeling and why they did what they did to me. And with that one simple step, putting myself in their shoes. I felt their pain.

And I remembered Jesus and how he proclaimed absolution for those who nailed him to the cross: **“Father forgive them, for they do not know what they’re doing.”**

And I found the strength of will and the humility at that moment to say, “Dear Lord Jesus, forgive ME for I have sinned against YOU.” For when we withhold forgiveness from other people we sin against God.

And I felt my sin-filled heart lighten. Then I took a deep breath and I said about my friend, “I forgive you; I hold nothing against you; God bless you with peace.”

Immediately the burden of clinging to so much anger was lifted from my heart. I felt ten pounds lighter afterwards. I was free.

Friends in Christ, if you have a heavy heart because of unresolved conflict in your relationships, come to the Cross on Calvary with me, seeing in your mind’s eye Christ’s sacrifice for the sins of the world.

If you are angry with another person because of what they did to you, how they hurt you, lied to you, stole from you, deceived you, betrayed you, come with me into the loving arms of Jesus, your Lord and Savior.

If you are filled with regret for sins you have committed against others, sins for which you do not feel you have been forgiven, receive this gift now. As an

ordained servant of God, I declare to you that your sins are forgiven in the name of the Triune God.

Friends in Christ, you are forgiven. The burdens you've been carrying around in your heart have been taken away by Jesus.

This week, brothers and sisters, use the power of the forgiveness you have received to forgive the people who've hurt you. Whether it's your mom and dad for your crummy childhood, the driver who cut you off on your way to church, a family member who stole from you, a church member who hurt your feelings, whatever it is, forgive them, and be set free.

And this week, as you experience the burden of anger lifted from your mind and your heart, may you find an opportunity to share this Good News of the forgiveness of sins with another person in the name of Jesus. Amen.