

November 18, 2012

Scripture Lessons

I Timothy 2:1-7

Luke 23: 33-43

Sermon *Forgiving is Thanksgiving*

Well there is an old story from Vermont, that I picked up when I was in New England one summer, many years ago. The story tells about Frank and Abigail. Frank and Abigail had been married for many, many years. One morning over the breakfast table, they had this terrible, terrible argument. Frank said some things he shouldn't have said, and so did his wife Abigail. And finally they both got everything they needed to off their chest and then Frank began the process of the apologies. He took Abigail into his arms and he told her that he was sorry for the things that he was sorry for the things he had said, and he asked her to forgive him. Abigail said that everything was forgiven, and that she would forget the whole incident. But as the weeks passed Abigail continued to remind Frank of what he had said and what he had done. And finally she mentioned it once too often and Frank said "Abby when I apologized to you for that argument, you said that not only would you forgive me but that you would forget everything that happened. For the past weeks anytime anything goes wrong, you keep reminding me of this incident. Well that is true said Abigail, and I want you to know that I have forgotten the argument and that I have forgiven you, but the reason I keep bringing it up is that I don't want YOU to forget!

Have you heard that before??? Which goes to show that it is not easy to forgive, is it? And it is even more difficult to forget.

When we have been hurt by someone else, it is so natural to nurse that grievance, and it is so natural to let that grievance fester. It is kind of like a cancer and when we can't put things aside, it starts to spread throughout everything we say and everything we do. By not being willing to forgive another whether they ask for that forgiveness or not, we sort of plant the seeds for our own destruction in life. In today's lesson, which is one that you might think is a strange one for Thanksgiving Sunday, from Luke. One of the two men that were crucified with Jesus does not ask outright for forgiveness. He just recognizes who Jesus is. Now Jesus could have waited for a more deliberate confession, but instead he says to them, truly I say to you that you will be with me in paradise. In essence, Jesus is saying to him you are forgiven. Earlier Jesus had said Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do. And here he was forgiving the very ones that wanted to crucify him. This is truly I think, one of the most significant and beautiful moments in Jesus entire life, and in Jesus' entire ministry, for being willing to forgive those who are taking his life and was asking God to also forgive them. It is interesting to note that they had not asked for forgiveness either for what they had

been doing. Now in the same context, we have to remember what Jesus had said to Peter early on in his ministry, Peter had come to Jesus and asked him, How many times he should forgive his brothers, should it just be 7 times?, Jesus you will remember said, is say to you 70 times 7. And that is a lot of times, but in essence he is saying that large number, because he is saying that forgiveness doesn't have limits.

And thinking about what Jesus has to say on this subject, and how he translated his words into concrete action in his life. It seems to me that there are at least 4 basic attitudes that exist about forgiveness. Please, please remember in what I am about to say, that I am not equating being in a relationship, with being a forgiving person to others. I realize sometimes it may not be possible to forgive in a relationship with people, or at least it may not be possible until some trust is reestablished. At the very least it does not mean that we must not mean that we must put ourselves in a position to be continually physically or emotionally hurt by others.

So the first attitude is that of individuals that feel that there is no way on earth or in heaven that they could ever forgive the person. They say not only to themselves, but to the whole world around them that under no circumstances will I ever forgive that person, this wrong has to be avenged and besides it is a sign of weakness to forgive, and I am too strong a person to do such a thing. This feeling is often caused because the hurt has been so deep that person feels that a commitment has been broken or there has been an outright betrayal, It seems that nothing could be said ever that could begin the process of forgiveness.

The second view is similar to that of Abigail with her relationship with Frank. Here the person claims to forgive but clearly that person can't ever really forget. Here she constantly keeps bringing that hurt to mind for the other person, Actually, Abigail's like this can't forget as this view continues to feed the grievance. The hurt is uppermost in the persons' mind, and a result her or she cannot forgive 70 times 7 times, in fact there is not a way they can give forgiveness even one time although the person maintains that there has been forgiveness.

It is a hard concept to grasp but when we forgive someone, we are saying to that person, that that we are at least attempting to forgive. And I know it is hard to reestablish that relationship with that person to the point by which that person broke that relationship in the past. After the problem has been properly solved, yet we constantly bring to mind and remind that person in the wrong what they have done to us then the message we are sending to that person, is that that issue has not been forgiven and so trust erodes and eventually there is no grounds for our relationship with that person to continue. Too many times parents and children and good friends and even our spouses, go their separate ways just for that reason.

What is done over the years, by constantly reminding and not forgiving becomes almost insurmountable.

And so a third approach to forgiveness under duress, How many of you have ever been forced to forgive somebody. It's a push isn't it? We forgive because we know we ought to, because we know that we should. We know all too well the words of Jesus who commanded that we should love one another. Love implies forgiveness and that forgiveness, should know no bounds and reluctantly and under duress we say 'I forgive you'. We try and we try very hard, we push our hurt down inside ourselves, but kind of like a fire, that hurt smolders and burns inside of us. We know that we ought to be forgiving and we also know that we should forget, Jesus expects this of us, and we don't want to disappoint Jesus, or ourselves or others. But just because Jesus said this and expected his followers to do this, it does not mean it is an easy task. We try to forgive but the bitterness and hurt still remains. So there has got to be a better way. So finally I think there is the view that we need to see things from kind of a cosmic perspective. We need to realize that God is constantly forgiving us. You and I both know that this is a difficult place to reach, because day after day we need to be forgiven for our shortcomings and our failures as well. We acknowledge to Saint Paul that the good we do and want to do is often drowned out by the evil things that we continue to do anyway. And yet in spite of all these things each day, God's infinite wisdom reaches out to all humanity and forgives each one of us. Even though we might not recognize God's forgiveness it is never the less consistently and constantly waiting for each one of us. And for these reasons then we grant forgiveness to other people. We know we are not worthy recipients of God's forgiveness and love and likewise another might not give us their love and forgiveness, we must not withhold our own. Having been blessed by God in so many ways, we know we are called upon to demonstrate this truth in our relationships with each other. John Oxenham expressed this better I think better than I could in a poem entitled 'The Ways' I think you will see this approach in the poem.

The Way

*To every man there openeth,
A Way and Ways, and a Way,
And the High Soul climbs the High Way,
And the low Soul gropes the Low,
And in between, on the misty flats,
To the rest of us drift to and fro.
But to every man there openeth
A High Way, and a Low.
And every person must decide*

The way his soul shall go.

How then do we show our gratitude to God in this season of Thanksgiving? Which way, as Oxenham puts it in his poem, will each of us choose? I think if we follow the example of Jesus, no matter how hard it is, on our journey of faith, forgiving becomes for us Thanksgiving. Forgiving for us, becomes Thanksgiving.

And together we say. AMEN