

November 24 2013

Scripture Lessons ~ *Colossians 1:11-20*

*Luke 23:33-43*

Sermon            *The High Way of Forgiveness*

Well there is an old story from Vermont, I picked up one summer when I was visiting New Hampshire which tells about Frank and Abigail, who had been married for many, many years. One morning over the breakfast table they had a terrible argument. Frank said some things he shouldn't have said, and Abigail said some things she shouldn't have said, and finally they both got everything they needed to say off their chests, and Frank began the apologies. He took Abigail into his arms and told her he was sorry for the things he had said to her that day, and he asked her to forgive him. Abigail said all was forgiven and she would forget the whole incident. But as the weeks went by Abigail continued to remind Frank about what he had done and about what he had said. Finally she mentioned it once too often and Frank said, "Abby when I apologized to you about that argument you said you not only forgive me, but you would forget that it even happened, but over the past few weeks anytime goes wrong you keep reminding me if the incident". Abby said "that is true, I want you to know I have forgotten about the argument, and I have completely forgiven you, but the reason I keep bringing it up is because I don't want you to forget!"

Boy it isn't easy to forgive is it? And it is even more difficult to forget. When we have been hurt by another person, it is natural to nurse the grievance and to let that grievance to fester, I have likened it many times to a cancer, and when we don't forgive and put it aside, it sort of spreads throughout everything we say and everything we do. By not being willing to begin the process of forgiving another person, whether they ask forgiveness or not, I fear that we plant the seeds of our own destruction in the process.

**Today's lesson from Luke a lesson which by the way may seem pretty strange this time of year, especially on a Thanksgiving Sunday, strangely enough I get surprised every 3 years because it is the scripture for this Sunday in the Lectionary. One of the two men who are crucified with Jesus, does not ask outright at all for forgiveness, he only recognizes who Jesus is, and Jesus could have waited around on the cross for a proper confession, instead Jesus simply says to him, "truly I say to you today you will be with me in paradise".**

**In essence Jesus is saying to the man, you are forgiven. Earlier Jesus had said, "Father forgive them they know not what they do" and here he is forgiving the very people that are crucifying him. This truly I think, is one of the most significant and beautiful moments in the life and ministry of Jesus because he is willing to forgive those who are taking his very life and was asking God also to forgive them, and they too had never asked for forgiveness. In the same context we need to remember what Jesus said to Peter much earlier in his ministry. Peter had come to Jesus and asked him 'how many times he should forgive his brother?' Should it be just seven times which in the bible would be a very complete number, and Jesus said unto him, "I don't say seven but I say seventy times seven". In essence, Jesus is saying that God's forgiveness has no limits. And thinking about what Jesus had to say on this subject and how Jesus ended up translating it into his life and into his ministry and concrete action, it seems to me that there are 4 basic attitudes that exist about forgiveness.**

**The first we have all heard before, it is an attitude in which the individual feels that in no way they can forgive another person. They say that to not only themselves, but to the whole world. Under no circumstances will they ever forgive that person. This wrong has to be avenged and it is a sign of weakness to forgive and they are too strong a person to do that. This feeling is often caused because the hurt is so very deep. Totally understandable, because he or she feel that a commitment has been broken and it has been an outright**

**betrayal. Nothing can ever be done to restore a relationship in this case.**

**A second view is sort of similar to Abigail and her relationship with Frank. Because here she claims to forgive but she can't ever forget it and let me say right here we never do quite forget no matter what we do. But there is forgetting and there is forgetting. He or she constantly keeps bringing it to mind, actually Abigail's like this can never forget or let alone forgive. This view continues to nurse the grievance, wallows in the hurt, and the hurt is uppermost in the person's mind, as a result, he or she can't forgive 70 times 7 or 7 times 7 or even 1 time for that matter; however that person maintains that there has been forgiveness. You know when we forgive someone we are saying to that person, that we are working toward a relationship that will move us beyond the episode that caused our hurt in the first place. Now that certainly doesn't mean that we are going to become bosom buddies with that person that we had the problem with, but if the problem has been properly resolved, yet we constantly bring it to mind and remind the other person of the wrong that they have done to us then the message we are sending is that the message that we are sending is that the forgiveness has never taken place. Trust can erode and eventually there are not really any grounds for a relationship to continue. Too many times parents and children and other family members go their separate ways for just this reason. What is done over the years by constantly reminding and not forgetting becomes almost insurmountable hurdle. Now this is certainly true of relational difficulties between spouses as well. One of the individuals can't forget he or she incessantly keeps reminding of the hurt that caused the problem a sense of disappointment or disillusion even when amends have been made. No meaningful relationship can be restored under this type of pressure, no dialog can be maintained when assaults of this kind are leveled on one another.**

**But there is a third basic attitude about forgiveness, not the best but it is call duress. It's called a little bit of force. We forgive because we know we ought to forgive, or because we should forgive, and it is**

the kind of forgiveness that we kind of go like this – alright I will force myself. We know all too well that the words of Jesus that commanded to love one another implies forgiveness and that forgiveness knows no bounds or no limitations, reluctantly we say, I forgive you, and we try and we try so hard that we push it out and when it hurts, we hide those hurts within ourselves, but like that latent fire it just smolders and burns inside of us. We know that we ought to be forgiving and we know that we should be forgetting as Jesus' words remind us of these things through his ministry and we don't want to disappoint Jesus. Just because Jesus said it and expected it of his followers, doesn't mean it is going to be easy, so we try to forgive, but we find that the bitterness of the hurt, still remains.

We have three choices so far, but I am going to give you a forth one. And this is a few that realizes that God is constantly forgiving us. Day after day and way after way, we need to be forgiven our shortcomings and our failures. We acknowledge as Saint Paul did that the good that we would do, we don't want to do, and the evil that we would do, we often do want to do. Each day God's infinite love reaches out to all of humanity and forgives each one of us. And although we may not recognize or ask for forgiveness it is never the less, consistently and constantly waiting for us. For this reason then we too, turn around and we grant forgiveness to others. We know that we are not worthy recipients of God's forgiveness and God's love, and likewise although another may not give us their love and forgiveness, we must not withhold our own. We have been blessed by God in so many ways know that we are called upon to demonstrate truth in our relationship with each other. This poem I came across by John Oxenham and I think it sums up best what I mean by this forth way of forgiveness.

**John Oxenham writes:**

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,  
The rest drift to and fro.  
But to every man there openeth  
A High Way, and a Low.  
And every man decideth  
The Way his soul shall go

**How then do we show our gratitude to God in this season of Thanksgiving? I think forgiving is our Thanksgiving to God. And I hope we will choose the highway of forgiveness for if we do I think that high way will set us free. Amen.**