

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sunday, September 13, 2020
Rev. Mark McLennan

“WHO NEEDS IT?”

Scriptures: Exodus 14:19–25 , Exodus 14: 26-31
Exodus 15:1b–11, 20–21 Matthew 18:21–35

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The Rev. Dr. Robert M. Zanicky

Do you recall one of the most famous photos to come out of the Vietnam War--a small girl running naked down the road with an expression of unimaginable terror, her clothes burned off, and her body scorched by napalm?

The man who coordinated the raid on this child's village in June 1971 was a 24-year old U.S. Army helicopter pilot and operations officer name John Plummer.

The day after the raid conducted by South Vietnamese airplanes, Plummer saw the photo in the military newspaper "*Stars and Stripes*" and was devastated.

"It just knocked me to my knees and that was when I knew I could never talk about this."

The guilt over the raid had become a lonely torment.

He suffered periodic nightmares that included the scene from the photo, accompanied by the sounds of children screaming.

The girl in the photo, **Pham Thi Kim Phuc**, survived 17 operations, eventually relocated to Toronto, and became an occasional goodwill ambassador for UNESCO.

In 1996 Plummer heard that Kim would be speaking at a Veterans' Day observance in Washington, not far from his home.

"If I could talk face-to-face with the pilot who dropped the bombs, I would tell him we could not change history, but we should try to do good things for the present."

Plummer, in the audience, wrote her a note, "*I am that man,*" and asked an officer to take it to her.

At the end of the speech, he pushed through the crowd to reach her and soon they were face-to-face.

"She just opened her arms to me," Plummer recounted. *"I fell into her arms sobbing."*

All I could say is, *"I'm so sorry, I'm just so sorry."*

"It's all right," Kim responded. *"I forgive. I forgive."*

(A story taken from "The Forgiving Self" by Robert Karen, 2001)

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How profound is the need to be forgiven and to forgive.

You know it deep inside. You feel it.
You need the freedom of being forgiven and forgiving.

Forgiveness -- a word, a concept, a reality of life that is filled with nuances and always in need of a human context.

Forgiveness

- needed for any society to exist and flourish
- needed for relationships to continue and mature
- needed for one's personal enhancement and health.

Recently, scientific studies are catching up with religious concepts.

Over the last few years, studies have been taking place on the concept of forgiveness.

Recent research shows that holding on to anger increases your chances of a heart attack as well as cancer, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and other illnesses.

Forgiveness boosts your self-esteem and lowers your blood pressure and heart rate. Forgiveness also helps you sleep better at night and boosts a positive change in your attitude.

"Forgiveness is an intellectual decision you make to give up your anger and feelings of revenge," declared psychiatrist Richard Fitzgibbons.

He added that forgiving is not forgetting; it is letting go of anger and hurt and moving on.

Studies have found that those who forgive no longer had feelings of anxiety and depression and felt better about themselves.

"Forgiveness has remarkable healing power in the lives of those who utilize it," added Dr. Fitzgibbons.

"Forgiveness is more than a moral imperative, more than a theological dictum. It is the only means, given our humanness and imperfections, to overcome hate and condemnation, and proceed with the business of growing and loving," says psychologist Paul Coleman.

Jesus is greatly concerned about forgiveness.

Forgiveness is often the topic for discussion.

How many of us are bound by the chains of resentment?

*"No matter what, I will never let go of how you wronged me.
I will take this anger, this hatred, to the grave!"*

There is no freedom in such hatred.

For resentment controls you.

It permeates your being, your soul.

That's why Jesus has so much to say and declare about forgiveness.

AGAIN - Good old Peter steps up to Jesus and asks him a sincere question.

In fact, he asks him a very important question.

It was the question of forgiveness.

*"Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?
As many as seven times?"*

Peter would have known that the contemporary orthodox thought on the matter was that a person should forgive his brother three times.

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Peter wanted to know,

"Really, how many times should I be willing to forgive someone who has sinned against me? Give me a formula, an equation, that will allow me to fulfill my obligation to that other person and keep me in good standing with my God.

Is it three, perhaps even seven?"

Listen, watch, here it comes. Jesus said to him, *"I do not say to you seven times but seventy times seven."*

Now for you math wizards, you've probably already multiplied that and got 490 times.

Wow!

How in the world am I going to be able to keep track of all of this?

Maybe I should carry a forgiveness book with me and jot down those times I've forgiven him or her.

At least I will know when I can stop forgiving.

I will know that I have gone far enough.

Hold on, though! Jesus did not mean 490 times and Peter knew this.

What Jesus was saying by the use of the number seven, which is the number of perfection in antiquity, was, *"You should forgive seventy times seven times seventy to infinity."*

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In other words, there are to be no limits on the amount of times you forgive, for God has not set any limits on forgiving.

But in another way, this thought crushes us. *"You mean, Jesus, I must forgive even when I don't feel like it? Even when it hurts?"*

And Jesus says, *"Yes, indeed!"*

An interesting factor in forgiveness is that it not only does something for the one forgiven, but it does something also for the person who is doing the forgiving.

It's freeing.

So, why is it that many people don't forgive?

Jesus followed his answer to Peter's question with a wonderful story of a man who owed his king 10,000 talents.

This was equal to **15 years of wages** to a laborer at that time.

The man pleaded for the king to have patience, and he would repay him everything.

The king had pity on this man, and he forgave him his total ...debt.

Indeed, this man was greatly pleased!

The story continues.

This forgiven man was out walking, and he came up to another servant. This servant owed him 100 denarii, about a day's wages.

And what do you suppose this newly forgiven man did about this? He grabbed the debtor by the throat, and he said to him, "*Pay what you owe!*"

De ja vu?

This owing servant pleaded with the forgiven man. "*Have patience with me and I will repay you.*"

But the forgiven man refused to be moved and had the other servant thrown into debtor's prison.

Can you believe it?

Here was a person forgiven a ...debt of what amounts to 15 years of work, and he was not willing to forgive a debt owed to him of one day's work.

Now, I'm not talking about banking here.

The issue is forgiveness and consistency.

Jesus could have referred to something other than money to make his point, but he knew what would get their and our attention.

The issue here is-you have been forgiven by Almighty God and can it be that you are not willing to merely forgive a fellow human being?

The debt you owe to God was uncountable, and yet you've received forgiveness.

Now, when you're in the trenches, is it possible that you won't forgive someone who has wronged you?

This is almost beyond comprehension.

And yet you won't forgive, you who have been forgiven by God.

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Forgiveness is not passive resignation to a bad situation.

Rather, forgiveness is to be a positive, joyful activity in which we change from seeing ourselves as victims to seeing ourselves as victors.

Forgiveness enables us to move from weakness to strength, from inadequacy to self-affirmation.

The presence of the Divine in our lives is perceived in forgiving others.

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Forgiveness is so nuanced!

- We need to forgive. We need to repent, apologize, change our ways.
- We need to clear the air. We need to forgive in order to be forgiven.

We also need to forgive for purely personal reasons.

As you know, people can be cruel.

There are those who will never repent, ask forgiveness, and they will glory in your pain.

There are times when you need to let go of all that heartbreak and forgive the past.

Now, if you don't like the word forgive for this, use another word--let go, break free--but allow yourself to be free from the past hurt and pain that has gone on without reconciliation.

It takes **two** to reconcile. It takes **one** to forgive.

You are not excusing the action.

You are not ignoring the wrong, the sin committed and the person responsible.

You are not eclipsing justice.

What you are doing is setting yourself free from the weight of harm that you have carried far too long.

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Over the years I've seen too many wonderful people, children of God, be dragged down into despair over what another has done to them.

There was no chance for reconciliation and they just kept hold of the anger and harm, not knowing what to do with it, ever reliving the pain, allowing the perpetrator -- long gone -- to hold them in his or her power.

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Forgive. Let it go. Release it! Throw it out!

Take back the God-given power you have for your own life.

For some, the time is right.
For others, it will take time and healing.

Perhaps you need to talk with someone, but take control.

Forgiveness is not weakness. It is not passive, not gutless.

Forgiveness and being forgiven is part of the fabric of being human.

Serious issues stare us in the face when we consider forgiveness.

Forgiveness is healthful. Forgiveness is freeing.

It may take time. It may be one-sided.

But it will release you. It will set you free!

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, REDEEMER AND SUSTAINER. AMEN

Call to Worship: Psalm 103

Come, bless the Lord with me!

For the Lord is like a father to his children compassionate and merciful,
filled with endless love.

He forgives our sins, and heals the sickness inside us;

he surrounds us with love and mercy and fills our lives with good things!

Let's worship God together!

PRAYER OF APPROACH

Liberating God, we worship you.

We praise you for delivering your people of old from enslavement in Egypt
by opening up a new and unexpected future before them.

They experienced your grace and mercy in awesome and life-sustaining ways
which must have been like an impossible dream coming true.

Through these acts you showed your compassion for the weak and powerless of this world.

We praise and adore you for opening up a new future for us when your love and compassion,
your mercy and grace became enfleshed in Jesus Christ.

He delivered us from the bondage of evil and sin through his death on the cross.

The impossible once more became reality when love defeated evil once and for all.

We pray that this time of worship will be a true offering of our wonder and praise that you
should care for us so deeply and so faithfully.

Reconciling God, we would rather gossip about those who sin against us,
than speak to them privately; we would rather parade our wounds for all to see, than quietly
work toward forgiveness and reconciliation.

Help us choose the harder road, the road that opens possibilities for real healing, real
forgiveness, and real growth in your Spirit.

Help us place the best interests of our community of faith above our own need
for public vindication. Amen.

ASSURANCE

It is because Jesus Christ pays the last full measure that our sins are forgiven.

This gift of forgiveness makes us able, with the power of Holy Spirit, to choose to forgive,
renew and live again in right relationship with each other and with our God.

In the name of Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

PRAYERS FOR OTHER PEOPLE

Lord in your mercy, ***Hear our Prayer***

Dear God, how do you keep track of us all?

So many people, some many needs, so much suffering!

Yet you love each like the most generous of fathers, and feel their pain like the most devoted
of mothers.

Help us to be inclusive in our loving like you are.

For the suffering and those who ease their pain, the sorrowful and those who try to comfort
their grief, the diseased and those who work for their healing;

Lord in your mercy, ***Hear our Prayer***

For the abused and those who seek justice for them, the weak and those who lend them
unmeasured support, the heavy-laden and those who share the load;

Lord in your mercy, **Hear our Prayer**
For the misunderstood and those who listen, the timid and those who speak up for them, the lost and those who will suffer to see their recovery;
Lord in your mercy, **Hear our Prayer**
For the strong and those who keep them gentle, the wise and those who keep them humble, the kind and those who shield them from over-stretching themselves;
Lord in your mercy, **Hear our Prayer**
For the violent and those who must arrest them, the cruel and those who must contain them, the corrupt and those who must judge and sentence them;
Lord in your mercy **Hear our prayer.**
For the strong in faith and those learn from them, the battlers and those who affirm them, the happy and those who rejoice with them;
Lord in your mercy, **Hear our Prayer**
For peacemakers and those who trust them, the leaders and those who vote for them, the opinion makers and those who are swayed by them;
Lord in your mercy, **Hear our Prayer**

Compared with you, Holy Friend, our compassion is miserly, and our circle of care is most meagre.
Nevertheless, we want to be more like you, asking that you will conscript our prayers and actions into the work of your universal salvation.
Through Christ Jesus our Saviour, whose words we now pray together...

The Lord's Prayer

*Our Father in Heaven, Hallowed be your name, Your kingdom come,
Your will be done, On earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins As we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial And deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, Now and forever. Amen.*

STEWARDSHIP THOUGHT -Jonathan Maberry , author, editor, playwright,

Generosity could be as contagious as the zombie plague as long as enough people were willing to be carriers.

Benediction: Matthew 18: 21-35

As you have been forgiven,

now go into a world that needs your forgiving, healing touch.

Bring peace and hope to others,
sharing God's love with them.

In the name of the Creator, Christ our Saviour, and the Holy Spirit.

AMEN.