

**Sermon Forgiveness-How to do it, What is it? March 9, 2008, Rev. Thomas Hall, Shadow Rock United Church of Christ, Phoenix, AZ (Mark 2: 1-12) Matthew 18:21-22**

**Probably no other topic has been asked of me to preach about than “forgiveness.” It surpasses the themes of death, theological topics, justice issues and peace issues. Forgiveness is a theme that attracts us for several reasons:**

- 1. It affects us, for we have relationships in which we have asked to be forgiven**
- 2. we have hurt others and we want to know what we should do**
- 3. it is mentioned in the 12 step programs of addiction, as a step in which one goes to ask forgiveness**
- 4. Jesus spoke of it several times, including the question asked him by Peter, who inquired how many times must we forgive**
- 5. Jesus spoke of forgiving from the cross**
- 6. and finally, the question of forgiving and forgetting...does “forgiving mean that I have to forget too?”**

**We all have at one time or another experienced the one who has offended us, said unkind words, and who has tried to control us. How do we relate to that person? Do we go to them, or do we wait for them to come to us. (Jesus said, before leaving your offering, if you know of someone who has a grudge against you, go that person...**

**We pray in the Lord’s Prayer: forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Forgiveness. The backside of Christianity as I have referred to this concept. The backside of love.**

**Forgiveness is a theme, a topic that often we want to do, to appreciate, to understand, to experience, yet we find it hard to do, and besides, we also want justice.**

**All of us have forgiveness issues that are part of our lives, some of which are still unsettled. Like a scab, we continually pick at it so that it never can heal. We even have a bumper sticker that says, "Don't get mad, get even!" It may be that the way most of us imitate God is by claiming that "vengeance is ours," contrary to what God said.**

**Forgiveness doesn't work unless accompanied by honesty. And if you're the bad guy, you can't expect God, friends or spouse to say, "Sure, we forgive you." Okay, so you didn't have sex with that woman, but both you and those you have offended must be unflinchingly frank or it's a no-go all the way around. There is no free forgiveness.**

**Forgiveness was not free for Adam and Eve - they get evicted.**

**Not for David after his fling with Bathsheba - the child and thousands of others die.**

**Not for Samson - he dies blind in a pile of rubble.**

**Not for King Saul - he dies on his sword.**

**Not for Ananias and Sapphira - they lie, they die.**

**Not for John Mark - Paul sends him packing.**

**So you've been cheated, abused, battered, lied to, stolen from and deprived of. What are you going to do? Just say it's okay? True, there are some conditions under which you may be able to**

offer forgiveness finally, but that's not what we're talking about here. You can't just say, "Forget about it."

Forgiveness is not about forgetting.

Forgiveness is not saying the offense never happened! It did.

Forgiveness is not saying that everything's okay. It isn't.

Forgiveness is not saying we no longer feel the pain of the offense. We do.

So what is it that we do say?

**Forgiveness says: "I still feel the pain, but I am willing to let go of your involvement in my pain."**

This is what the late Dutch priest Henry Nouwen said about forgiveness: By not forgiving I chain myself to a desire to get even, thereby losing my freedom.

What a picture! By not forgiving, he is not free any more. He is controlled, commanded by some force which is beyond him.

Frederick Buechner, a theologian, said: When you forgive someone who has wronged you, you're spared the dismal corrosion of bitterness and wounded pride.

So, how do we handle this, how is it that we come to understand and move on "forgiveness."

In the scriptures we've had these past few weeks, the emphasis is on healing. By carrying our wounds, our inability to forgive, we are not whole. All of us continue like this. I've come to realize that forgiving is very much like a process. It is like grieving, a process, a journey that we go through. We might think that we have forgiven and even forgotten but old hurts have a way of resurfacing from a wound that we had hoped had been healed. Forgiveness is a commitment to face life with a posture that risks rather than protects.

So who is it that we look to for guidance?

Jesus forgave His disciples when they let Him down during the toughest hour of His life. He was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, and He asked his closest friends if they would be with Him for a few moments. They fell asleep three different times. We know how we feel when our friends let us down. But Jesus still forgave them.

Jesus forgave Peter for denying Him, saying he didn't know Him. We know how angry we are when somebody deserts us when we are in need.

Jesus forgave Thomas for doubting Him. Do you know what upset, what alarm, we show when somebody doubts us, doesn't trust us?

Jesus forgave Judas for betraying Him. I don't need to try to say what we do when that happens to us.

Jesus forgave all of the people who were alive and around Him for creating a condition which led to his murder. So often we have trouble with his words from the cross. We argue them, debate them and rationalize them. Jesus said: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." We may say they did know what they were doing. In a sense they did. But in a deeper sense they

didn't. But it doesn't make any difference. What matters is the magnificence, the glory of the love which brought Jesus to the place where He could say, "Whatever, whatever, I forgive you."

Jesus refused to be chained to bitterness, to anger or to revenge. I believe that the Resurrection never would have happened if Jesus had gone to the grave needing to forgive. He needed to go there cleansed and pure.

Forgiveness is the largesse of a very big love.

So what steps do we take to get out of the dungeon of bitterness and unchained from its corrosive power? So often we want to get to the forgiveness place without doing the emotional work, and for big hurts we have to do the emotional work. We've got to go through the process. And it's tough, and it takes time, and it's painful.

Jeanne Safer, a psychologist in New York, wrote a book called *Forgiving and Not Forgiving*. She says there are at least three things we need to do.

The first thing you do is to internally re-engage with the pain of the relationship. I understand that to mean that you get into the center of the pain, take every aspect of the suffering and you stay in it for a while.

The next thing you do is recognize what this is doing to you. You recognize how the hurt and the bitterness and the mean-spiritedness has disrupted your life and kept you from progressing.

The third step is to re-interpret, in light of what you've learned, so that you can find ways of moving on. I would even go one step further. I say you look for the presence of the Holy Spirit, and let it be of assistance, because the big-ticket items we cannot solve by ourselves.

Forgiveness is an attitude of faith where we turn over to God the business of how the other person is doing. It is saying: "I'm okay, and I am willing to let God deal with whether you are okay, and I am willing to let go of my need to be the instrument of correction and rebuke in your life."

As challenging as it is, forgiveness may be the supreme virtue, the highest form of love, for it declares "I will attempt to go on loving the life in you, or the divine in you or the soul in you, even when I totally abhor what you have done or what you stand for.

Forgiveness, is a way to experience God....