

POWER IN FORGIVENESS

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. W. Harvey Jenkins, Jr. on
Sunday, January 28, 2007 at Montevallo Presbyterian Church.

Gospel Readings: Mark 2:1-12 and John 3:14-17

On the bargain table at **Books-A-Million**, I discovered a fun little book entitled ***America's Dumbest Criminals***. Among the true stories related in its pages is that of Bad Luck Brown from Pensacola, Florida. Late one night, Mr. Brown entered a busy liquor store and handed the cashier a note demanding money. The cashier read the note and quickly handed over all the money in his drawer. The robber then made a speedy getaway.

When the police arrived on the scene, they found the holdup note. Turning it over, they knew exactly who to go after and where to find him. Bad Luck Brown had written the note on the back of a letter from his probation officer, complete with his name and address.

In his book entitled ***You're in Charge***, Cecil Osborne, talks about the deep need that we human beings have for forgiveness. In making his point, Dr. Osborne tells of a forger who unconsciously signed his own name on some bad checks, and ended up paying his debt to society by doing time in San Quentin.

Psychological studies have found that when guilt is not resolved through punishment or some form of restitution, an inner mechanism goes to work bringing on depression, anxiety, or even some physical ailment or infirmity. There is something within us human beings that outs our guilt and enforces the edict – “Confess or be punished!”

That may have been the situation for the paralyzed man we read about in Mark's Gospel. Jesus seems to have understood it that way. When healing the man, he did not say to him “Be healed!” -- but “Your sins are forgiven.” When questioned about such an unorthodox treatment, Jesus responded, “Which is easier to say ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or ‘Stand up, take your mat and walk.’” Either way, the man got up and walked. ***There is healing power in forgiveness.***

Often ours is not so much a problem of finding forgiveness as of being willing to accept our forgiven-ness. On an unconscious level, relinquishing our guilt by being forgiven wounds our self-pride; we would rather be punished, than be granted absolution. Often we punish ourselves by refusing to accept forgiveness. Gert Behanna, a New York socialite whose alcoholism almost killed her, shares her experience of forgiveness in her autobiography, ***The Late Liz***. She writes,

Once I came to know that I, just as I was—almost a total mess—was accepted, was died for, just as I was; then I had to say, “Well, Lord, if you forgive me, I guess I'm going to have to forgive myself. And so, gradually, because I was so bogged down with guilt, gradually, I came to be able to live with me...to love and forgive me....

There is saving power in forgiveness.

The Gospel truth is that Jesus came to save us not only from feeling guilty, but also from everything of which we are guilty. One of the early Church Fathers, Cyril of Jerusalem, is reported to have taught groups of catechumens preparing to become members of the Church:

He is called Jesus by a fitting name...Jesus means, according to the Hebrew, Savior, but in the Greek tongue, The Healer, since he is the physician of souls and bodies, curer of spirits, curing the blind in body and leading minds into the light, healing the visibly lame and guiding the steps of sinners to repentance.

Jesus lived and died for our forgiveness. Yet, forgiveness is not an isolated event. It is an atmosphere in which we live. It is an environment charged with an alternating current of giving and receiving.

One of the most frequently told parables of Jesus had to do with a man who owed a large sum of money. When the debtor went to the person from whom he had borrowed the money and confessed that he could not repay the debt, the lender forgave his debt. The fellow then turned around and went to a man who was indebted to him and demanded immediate payment. When that man couldn't pay, he was thrown into prison. Jesus condemned the man who was forgiven but unforgiving. As Matthew's version of "The Lords Prayer" puts it, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

God expects us to share forgiveness with others. When we withhold forgiveness, the current is interrupted, and we are unable to receive forgiveness. That dynamic principle lies at the very heart of the Gospel. It is so critical to living in relationship with God that Jesus says,

When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. (Mt. 5:23f)

German Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a member of the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany that defied the dictum to pledge supreme allegiance to Adolph Hitler affirming that only "Jesus Christ is Lord." He was imprisoned, and near the end of the war he was executed. From his prison cell he had been able to smuggle a number of letters and papers out of prison, among them was a sermon written for the wedding of his nephew. He wrote,

God intends you to found your marriage on Christ.... In a word, live together in the forgiveness of your sins, for without it no human fellowship, least of all a marriage, can survive. Don't insist on your own rights; don't blame each other. Don't find fault with each other. But take one another as you are, and forgive each other every day from the bottom of your hearts.

Forgiving each other every day assures the future of a relationship. **There is reconciling power in forgiveness!**

Out of the strong conviction that confession and forgiveness can lead beyond personal and interpersonal healing to the healing of a nation, the post apartheid government of

South Africa established a **Truth and Reconciliation Commission**. That body was given authority to grant amnesty to persons that had committed even the most heinous of atrocities. They would be forgiven of their crimes if they would come forward and tell the truth about their actions.

Over and over, black and colored South Africans were willing forgive rather than demand revenge largely because of the African notion of ubuntu. Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes the meaning of ubuntu in his book **No Future Without Forgiveness**,

It is to say, "My humanity is caught up, inextricably bound up, in yours." We belong to the bundle of life. We say that a person is a person through other persons.... A person with ubuntu... has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.

The Truth and Reconciliation process did not deny the atrocities of the past, but looked them in the eye and told the truth about them. Only by such truth telling could a new South Africa move into the future with honesty, compassion, and forgiveness. In Tutu's words,

If the wrongdoer has come to the point of realizing his wrong then one hopes there will be remorse.... This should lead him to confess the wrong he has done and ask for forgiveness.... The victim, we hope would be moved to respond to an apology by forgiving the culprit.

Dr. Spiwo Xapile is pastor of J. L. Zwane Uniting Presbyterian Church located in the South African township of Gugulatu. He served on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He admits that there were those who said that they could not forgive, but he says, "There were far more who were able to forgive and to be reconciled with those who had tortured and demeaned them." In some cases, predator and victim became friends.

Such forgiveness was not forgetting; and it was not mere sentimentality. It was abandoning the right to pay back the perpetrator, so that both victim and perpetrator might be liberated. He said that many people spoke of a great sense of relief after forgiving those who had been their enemies. **There is liberating power in forgiveness.**

South Africa's grand experiment provides a glimpse of life after brutal conflict and cruel repression. It shows that former enemies can be reconciled and walk together into the future. Therein lies the hope of a more humane society. It is a demonstration of the Kingdom of God breaking into human society.

God's forgiveness comes to us and to the world through the crucifixion and death of Jesus. The motivation and energy to live out that forgiveness comes through his resurrection and Spirit. Accept the fact that you are forgiven and discover the power in forgiveness. Like the paralyzed man, stand up and walk into the future – forgiving even as you have been forgiven.

