

THREE THINGS WE MOST WANT TO HEAR

TEXT: Matthew 18:21-35

INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPEL

Listen to the Gospel:

²¹Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²²Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. ²³“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denari; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

THREE THINGS WE MOST WANT TO HEAR

One of my pastor friends introduced me to a great theme for a wedding by saying: “The three things people most want to hear are: *“I love you. You are forgiven. Supper is ready.”* Yet it is fitting for today. In fact our gospel addresses “You are forgiven...” The liturgy for the day reminds us that God says “I love you.” And we conclude with the Lord’s Supper after we hear: *“Supper is ready, you are all welcome!”*

I love you! Words that transform!

A new musical artist on the rise is Amos Lee and this week on the CD Mission one of the songs has a refrain that goes like this:

My heart is a flower that blooms ever hour, I believe in the power of love!

Every week it our responsibility to share the story of God’s love, we focus on the cross of Jesus and ring the resurrection bell which as you might expect draws us to a deeper understanding of forgiveness. Love, forgiveness and food are those basic needs we all have; when we miss one or the other it is hard

to focus, beyond ourselves. What if we did begin with love? What if every child on earth believed that we were created out of love and for love? What if we had a sense that the world was a gracious place designed to feed and shelter us? Rather than a perception of scarcity drives conflicts and creates enemies. Martin Marty claimed that *if we begin with love we can end with plenty*. Amos Lee nailed it when he said, we bloom when we know we are loved!

I forgive you! Words that transform!

Do you remember where you were 10 years ago on this day September 11? Between 8:30 and 9 am I was listening to NPR and pulling into Perkins...on the south side of Sheboygan to meet with my text study buddies - when I heard I went in to alert the others...for those of you old enough probably remember the exact place.

It was an unforgettable, gut-wrenching, world-changing day. We all recall exactly where we were when the terrorists attacked. In terms of national impact, it was a day on par with the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the assassination of JFK.

I find it interesting that our lessons for today address forgiveness and even our liturgy focuses on reconciliation:

In Matthew, Jesus tells the parable of the unforgiving slave to remind his followers that God forgives our sins -- but only if we forgive those who sin against us. In the parable, a king tortures a slave who refuses to show mercy to a fellow slave, and Jesus promises, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart" (18:35). Ahhhh! What do we do with this lesson in light of today?

- Where was God presence on 9-11 10 years ago?
- Was God working for us, and if so, how?
- In the middle of so much loss of innocent life, what work did God do on 9-11?

Phillip Yancy, was asked after the terrorist attacks, "Where is God at a time like this?" He answered with a question of his own, "Where is the church when it hurts? If the church is doing its job -- binding wounds, comforting the grieving, offering food to the hungry -- I don't think people will wonder so much where God is when it hurts. They'll know where God is: in the presence of his people on Earth."

Then he reflected on what our nation was taught by 9-11 (Christianity Today, October 1, 2001): "We learned that even in a city known for its crusty cynicism, heroes can emerge. We learned that at a time of crisis, we turn to our spiritual roots: the President quoting Psalm 23, the bagpiper piping 'Amazing Grace,' the sanitation workers stopping by their makeshift chapel, the Salvation Army chaplains dispensing grace, the chaplains comforting the grieving loved ones. Thanks to them, we know where God is when it hurts." Here is the toughest question of the day:

- Ten years after the 9-11 attack, have we forgiven those who sinned against us?

During Lent we watched portions of the **Power of Forgiveness**. One of the people was Lynn McGuinn who lost her husband in the towers who said this:

I think America is ready for some sort of shake up idea. It needs to change. The thought processes need to move from - I've been wronged - ...to I would like to embrace another idea instead of anger, instead of bitterness, instead of war, instead of hate, instead of bias or prejudice. These are not things we need to be teaching our children.

In another more recent interview she said: *I wanted my children to remember their dad with love and not hate and revenge. The only way to do so was through the gift of forgiveness.*

- Where is the link between our willingness to forgive and the forgiveness we hope to receive from God?
- How can we pursue reconciliation with those who have done violence to us?

One woman who lost her legs in a terrorist bombing in London sounded a lot like Jesus when she said:

"I wish the world would stop - just stop and give us all time to see what is happening. Why are we killing each other - every day? It may sound naïve, simple, maybe too simple to take seriously - but - I don't understand why we are 'accepting' and 'tolerating' war and destruction and famine and poverty and oppression. When will the final bomb explode? When will enough be enough? The cycle has to stop - I can not hate the person who has done this to me; the cycle must end with me. I don't see it as my place to forgive the act, yet I am compelled to understand - to offer an open heart, to try to hear and ask why?"

You may not have moved to the place Lynn McGuinn and the woman from London have evolved...you may be one of those simply unable to say those words. On a weekend that already has threats of more violence; it may be too much to ask and yet we pray that one day we will be able to do so.

Even in this struggle Jesus gives us a lesson:

When he was crucified the first word of Jesus on the cross is about forgiveness: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). "We often read this as Jesus forgiving his executioners," "But in actual fact, Jesus is calling on God, his Father, to forgive them. Jesus is still in the midst of his suffering. He cannot forgive his executioners for something they have not yet completed. But he can call on his Father to forgive."

In the same way, we can ask God to forgive those who sin against us, "for they do not know what they are doing." In prayer, we can lift up those who have hurt us terribly, and trust God to include them in an act of forgiveness that is beyond our ability. Yet in our own lives the fact remains that one of the

most desired things we want to hear is I forgive you! And the capacity to do so is knowing that we are loved!

Supper is ready

I love you. I forgive you and supper is ready. In our ritual supper we call Holy Communion, we put that all together. God reaches out to us in love, caring for us like a mother or father who loves to feed their family, "Come, eat, supper is ready." And forgiveness is proclaimed every time-as basic as food and drink, "This cup in the new covenant in my blood given for you for the forgiveness of sins."

I like Philip Yancey's thoughts "we know where God is when it hurts" God is meeting us where we are and at our deepest points of need. Are you are afraid, or do you feel lonely? It is time to gather at the table. My brother is sad that his son is leaving for two years in Africa as he joins the Peace Core. And sometimes he keeps all that sadness inside so he is reminded to share his feelings with those he loves at the table over the weekend. Jesus invites you to sit down and eat and tell him about it. Pastor George will set the table to remind each one of us about feasting in the kingdom of God where we are in a place of safety, security and celebration.

Can you hear the voice of God? Come to the table, my children. You are loved, you are forgiven, and supper is ready. Hey Pastor George it is time to set the table! Amen.