

Easter Sermon Series: Resurrection Healing- "Forgiving"
Leviticus 6:1-7; Matthew 6:9-15; 18:15-22; Acts 16:16-2
Salem United Methodist Church; June 2, 2019
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Today is the last Sunday in our Easter Season. Next Sunday we begin the season of Pentecost. During this Easter Season we have looked at how the Resurrected Christ offers us healing from suffering, shame, and loss. Today we will be exploring the transformative power of forgiving.

I have two sets of questions for you. First set: Do you remember a time when someone hurt you with their words or actions? Despite the old phrase, "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Words can hurt. Actions can hurt. Sometimes people do things that hurt us and they aren't even aware that they are hurting us. What did you do about the hurt? What did you do about the pain from being hurt? Second set: Do you remember a time when you hurt someone with your words and actions? What did you do about it?

From young children we are taught to say, "I'm sorry," when we hurt another. Sometimes we were forced to say we were sorry when we really weren't. But we understood the concept that when we harm someone intentionally or unintentionally, we should apologize. When the person who harmed the other does not apologize, the relationship deteriorates and break apart.

When Janna became a teen-ager, she wasn't aware that her grandmother was verbally abusing her. They talked on the phone every day. And every day her grandmother would remind Janna in some off handed way that she was fat and ugly. Her grandmother would tell Jana things like nobody would ever want to be her friend and certainly no boy would ever want to date her. The remarks were subtle, but they were always there. Needless to say, Janna didn't think highly of herself. Then one day in college one of Janna's friends overheard a phone conversation Janna had with her grandmother. Her friend told Janna that her grandmother was verbally abusing her and that she shouldn't listen to her grandmother. Her friend reassured Janna that she was not fat or ugly. Janna was beautiful and very likeable. It took some convincing, but Janna began to believe her friend. However, those harmful words would loop over and over again in Janna's head. She had to work at stopping that looping. Janna, also, became angry with her grandmother. Why would she tear down someone she loved? Eventually she learned to forgive her grandmother. And before her grandmother's death, Janna had reconciled with her. They had begun a new, yet different relationship.

Forgiveness isn't always an easy thing to do when we are hurting deeply. Forgiveness doesn't excuse the wrong done. The person who has harmed needs to be held accountable for their actions. When Janna realized that her grandmother was harming her, she took action. She stopped calling her grandmother every day. In fact, she didn't talk to her for years. As Janna began to rebuild the relationship again, when her grandmother began to say negative things about Janna, she would stop her grandmother and tell her how those words hurt. If her grandmother continued Janna would hang up on her. Eventually her grandmother stopped saying mean things to Janna. Forgiveness is one way process, but restoration includes both parties.

Forgiveness is, also, a process of divine love that mends our hurts and wounds. To forgive another takes time. First, one needs to name the pain. Like Janna we can carry the pain around and be totally unaware of that we are in pain. Janna's friend named it for her. Naming the pain is a courageous act. Second, we have to feel the pain. We may need to cry. We may become angry. Feeling the pain helps us face the reality of the hurt. Third, we need to identify how this pain is holding us hostage, preventing us to become all that God meant for us to become. Fourth, we need to find a means to release that pain. Janna built a structure out of cardboard and set it on fire to help release the pain she felt from her grandmother. Releasing the pain provides space for the resurrection power to enter, for healing from one's woundedness to begin and

recreate a new reality of grace. Then the urge for revenge or to inflict pain on those who have harmed us diminishes. And in some cases, like Janna's, relationships can be restored.

Forgiveness is one of the tenets of the Judeo-Christian faith. God created a way for the ancient Israelites to be forgiven. When someone harmed another, they were also harming God. In order to be forgiven, they had to admit they did wrong, make amends with the person they harmed, and seek forgiveness from the person. Next, they were to seek forgiveness from God by bringing an animal to be killed for their sin and then roasted over an open fire. Usually a young animal was required for this sacrifice. Think about this process. First, the person had to admit that they harmed another. Second, they had to make amends. And then, third, they would go to their flocks and pick out an animal, take it to the priest, admit they did wrong, and watch the animal be killed and burned. If I had to pick an animal to be killed for my sin and then have to watch it die, I think I would think twice before harming someone again. Imagine the shame and guilt one would feel. This method was created to restore one's relationship with God and with the person that was harmed. Those who harmed others could be forgiven when they sought forgiveness from others.

Jesus put a different twist on forgiveness. In the prayer he taught the disciples to pray, he states that God will forgive us when we forgive others first. The Greek word used in the prayer means to owe a debt or moral obligation. If we have been hurt, we then have a moral obligation to forgive the offender. Understanding the power of forgiveness is so important to Jesus that he expounds on it after the prayer. Here he uses a different Greek word. This word means to overstep boundaries or limits of another or to trespass. Again, he emphasizes the need to forgive someone who has overstepped our boundaries as a moral obligation. Why forgive someone who has harmed? To forgive restores one from hurt. To forgive releases one from the pain and creates a new reality. To forgive can even restore the relationship between the victim and the offender. There have been instances where victims of crimes have met those who committed the crimes and forgave them. In some of these instances, because of forgiveness, new relationships were established. Forgiveness not only restores and heals, but creates a new reality.

Think back to the Israelites who brought animals to be sacrificed. How many times were the people allowed to seek forgiveness from God? As many times as needed. There was and still is no limit to God's grace. This is what Jesus meant when he answered the question, "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?" Seven was considered the perfect number. Jesus multiplies this by doubling the perfect number. Jesus is basically saying that there is no limit to God's grace for you and there should be no limit to your grace for others.

Today we come again to this Communion Table. Why do we have Communion? Holy Communion restores our relationship with God. The liturgy of Holy Communion is a process of restoration. We seek forgiveness for the times we harm others, and when we harm others, we harm God. That's why we have both a joint confession and a private confession, just between God and us. After the Confession, we receive forgiveness for our sins because Christ died for us. We no longer need to have animals die for us. The next part is to seek reconciliation with each other by offering the Peace we have just received from God for our sins. So now we seek forgiveness and offer peace to one another. The bread and the cup are not the Spirit of Christ who died for us, but they represent Christ's body that died for us, for the forgiveness of our sins. Holy Communion is a process of forgiveness for the harm we have done and a process of restoration as God offers us grace and a new start, a new beginning. John Wesley thought that we needed Holy Communion every day because every day we need God's forgiveness and a new beginning.

Resources: *A Resurrection Shaped Life: Dying and Rising on Planet Earth* by Jake Owensby;
The Universal Christ by Richard Rohr