

“Forgiveness and moving on”

September 11, 2011

Text: Psalm 103:1-13, Matthew 18:21-22

I.

The sermon last Sunday talked about *getting it*—*getting* what our Christian faith is all about. What does it mean to *GET* the Christian faith ... to understand it, to grasp it, to really have a sense of what it's about.

In some way, our *Spiritual Enrichment* event on September 23rd and 24th will deal with this. Dr. Paul Veliyathil will be inviting us to a *new awareness* of our faith, to new ways of *getting it*.

We can't *get* our Christian faith without, at the same time, *getting forgiveness*. Forgiveness is such a core element in our faith.

- As we think about our lives, certainly our national life, as we seek to sort things out on a national level with our economy and the need to put people back to work.
- As we reflect on our reckless involvement in Iraq and now the extended war in Afghanistan and how both wars have drained our economy.
- As we think back on the greed that misguided the countless poor decisions that led up to the housing crisis.
- As we think about all that has gone horribly wrong over the past decade; indeed, a number of pundits have labeled these past ten years: **America's Decade of Disaster.**

The point being, we need a lot of forgiveness in order to move on.

Well, what can we say? *It is what it is*. Still, we need to be able to forgive what we're able to forgive and forget what we need to forget so we can move on. On the national level, it's not clear we're going to be able to do this. And yet, we must. We owe it to those on whose shoulders we stand and we owe it to future generations.

II.

The theme of *forgiveness* is a theme that runs throughout the Bible, in both the Old and the New Testaments. Clearly, God knows and the biblical writers know that without *forgiveness*, we get stuck ... and we can't move on.

How often should I forgive, the disciple Peter asks Jesus? *As many as seven times??* *Not seven times*, responds Jesus, *but seventy-seven times*. Other translations say seventy times seven; in other words: whatever takes.

Forgiveness is one of the major themes sounded in the **Psalms**. The Psalmist knows. What the Psalmist knows is that for us to move on in life, to move beyond the clutches of yesterday, we have to be able to forgive the imperfections, the flaws, and the wrongs that have come our way in life.

No matter what our life-story, there comes a point where we have to awaken to the fact that we're all adults and that we have to stand up and take responsibility for our lives. The bottom line, again: we must be able to move on. Put another way, we must be able to live again. We cannot honor the LIFE that God gives us when we are forever stuck on yesterday.

III.

There are of course many levels of forgiveness. Some of our simple wrong doings are easily forgiven. Things we do or say that we regret. We can forgive someone who says something about us based on bad information, or maybe they had a bad day. We can forgive minor mess ups like when people give us bad directions or they inconvenience us by showing up late.

It gets more complicated when it comes to forgiving the mistakes our parents made in raising us; a too harsh and critical mother or father or a self-absorbed sibling that forever took advantage of us.

And then, there are the most serious affronts to our lives that result in death and the loss of loved ones. Forgiveness of these most heinous crimes against us does not come easily—nor should it.

In the aftermath of 9/11, how much can we forgive? Of course, without any contrition or repentance from the other side, *forgiveness* seems hollow, as if empty and without much grit. There are some trespasses in life—evil happenings—that are hard to move beyond.

IV.

The KEY for us is that we NOT get stuck there. We can't *live again* if we're forever stuck on the past, no matter how sad, tragic or unfair that past.

In an article on *Spirituality and Health*, Rabbi **Harold Kushner** tells about a woman in his congregation—a single mother, divorced, working to support herself and her three, young children. She doesn't want to hear about forgiveness.

Since my husband walked out on us, she reveals, every month is a struggle to pay our bills. I have to tell the kids we have no money to go to the movies while he's living it up with his new wife in another state. How can you tell me to forgive him?

Kushner's response to her is telling: *I'm not asking you to forgive him because what he did was acceptable in any way. It wasn't; it was mean and selfish. I'm asking you to forgive because he doesn't deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter, angry woman.*

With integrity, self-respect and dignity, *forgiveness* allows us to move on. It invites us to higher ground—to turn the page, that we might *live again*.

When we're able to *forgive*, it frees us from all the clutter, all the messiness, all the entrapment that weights down our spirit day after day. Think about your lives! Are there things you're clinging to, things you've been unable to forget and forgive that are paralyzing your ability to live and function?

I love the passion of the Psalmist in our reading from **Psalm 103**. Clearly, he's known the power of God's forgiveness in a personal way.

*Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.
Bless the Lord, O my soul ... who forgives all your iniquity ...
who heals you and redeems you ...*

*Who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
And satisfies you with good as long as you live ...*

*The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
As a father has compassion for his children,
So the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.*

We can feel the deep pathos and yearning of the Psalmist.

V.

In the aftermath of hurricane **Katrina**, a CNN story featured a group of six young people working in the French Quarter of New Orleans. They were a scraggly looking bunch—bartenders, exotic dancers, tattoo artists and so forth.

For several days, they'd been trying to escape the devastation and chaos in New Orleans, moving from one squalid shelter to another. At the point of the story, they were all without work and were literally on desperation's doorstep.

The news story focused on a young woman in the group. Her father was a pastor in the Midwest. Apparently, they'd had a falling out somewhere along the way. She'd run off as a teenager, had come down to New Orleans, ending up—finally—as a bartender in some seedy club in the French Quarter.

Her appearance did not inspire much hope in her prospects. Any part of her that could be pierced was pierced; anything that could not be pierced was tattooed. The CNN reporter ran into her on the side of the highway with her small group. She asked if she might use his cell phone to call someone to let them know that she was okay.

As it turns out, the young woman called her father, the pastor in the Midwest. They had not spoken for years. We can only imagine the nervousness and the tension. Her father answered the phone.

Daddy, it's me. I just want you to know that I'm okay, she said. Then she burst into tears, I don't know how we're going to get out of here! I'm so scared.

They exchanged a few words before she hung up. The reporter asked, *What did he say?*

With tears in her eyes, she answered, *He said he's coming down right away in the church van to pick us up.*

As a father has compassion for his children, writes the Psalmist.

VI.

Where forgiveness takes us! Where forgiveness takes us is to higher spiritual ground. Where it takes us is to healing and renewal and a powerful sense from within that *we can live again.*

LIVE AGAIN is exactly the direction towards which we need to move in our country. On the national level, where rancorous and divisive politics are sucking the life out of us, we **MUST** do better. There must be a thawing of the rigid, self-serving partisanship that's paralyzing our government's ability to function.

It's 9/11, ten years later. It's been a tough ten years our United States of America. Still, we must keep aiming for higher ground. We must continue to lift up the best in our spirit as we seek to live out the best in our faith.

We must forgive what we need to forgive and forget what we need to forget. And we must look to the best of our roots, the best of our traditions. We **MUST** find the purpose to rise to the challenge of these days.

On so, on this 9/11 Sunday, as we remember, as we pray, as we hope, let us place our trust in the words of the Psalmist:

For, indeed, *the Lord is merciful and gracious,
And as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is the Lord's steadfast love
towards those who honor him.*

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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