

The Freeing of Forgiveness

A sermon presented by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers presented Sunday, September 17th, 2017
at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Matthew 18:21-35

Maybe you won't recall one of the most famous photos to come out of the Vietnam War, but I do - that of a frail 9 year old Vietnamese girl running naked down the road with an expression of unimaginable terror on her face, her clothes burned off, and her body scorched by napalm? The man who coordinated the raid on this child's village in June 1971 was a 24-year old U.S. Army helicopter pilot and operations officer name John Plummer. The day after the raid, conducted by South Vietnamese airplanes, Plummer saw the photo in the military newspaper "Stars and Stripes" and he was devastated. "It just knocked me to my knees and that was when I knew I could never talk about this." The guilt over the raid had become a lonely torment. He suffered periodic nightmares that included the scene from the photo, accompanied by the sounds of children screaming.

The girl in the photo, Pham Thi Kim Phuc, survived 17 operations, eventually relocated to Toronto and became an occasional goodwill ambassador for UNESCO. In 1996 John Plummer heard that Kim would be speaking at a Veterans' Day observance in Washington, not far from his home.

In her speech Kim said: "If I could talk face-to-face with the pilot who dropped the bombs, I would tell him we could not change history, but we should try to do good things for the present." Plummer, in the audience, wrote her a note, "I am that man," and asked an officer to take the note to her. At the end of the speech, he pushed through the crowd to reach her and soon they were face-to-face. "She just opened her arms to me," Plummer recounted. "I fell into her arms sobbing." All he could say was, "I'm so sorry, I'm just so sorry."

"It's all right," Kim responded. "I forgive. I forgive."
(Taken from the book *The Forgiving Self* by Robert Karen, 2001)

How profound is the need to be forgiven and to forgive. You know it deep inside. You feel it. You need the freedom of being forgiven and forgiving. Maybe science will catch up with religious concepts, someday. Over the last few years, studies have been taking place on the concept of forgiveness. Recent research shows that holding on to anger increases your chances of a heart attack as well as cancer, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and other illnesses.

Forgiveness boosts your self-esteem and lowers your blood pressure and heart rate. Forgiveness also helps you sleep better at night and boosts a positive change in your attitude. "Forgiveness is an intellectual decision you make to give up your anger and feelings of revenge," declared psychiatrist Richard Fitzgibbons. He added that forgiving is not forgetting; it is letting go of anger and hurt and moving on.

That's why Jesus has so much to say and declare about forgiveness. Good old Peter steps up to Jesus and asks him a sincere question. Peter wanted to know, "Really, how many times should I be willing to forgive someone who has sinned against me? Give me a formula, an equation, that will allow me to fulfill my obligation to that other person and keep me in good standing with my God. Is it three, perhaps even seven?" Listen, here it comes. Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times but seventy times seven."

Now for you math wizards, you've probably already multiplied that and got 490 times. Wow! How in the world am I going to be able to keep track of all of this? Maybe I should carry a forgiveness book with me and jot down those times I've forgiven him or her. At least I will know when I can stop forgiving. I will know that I have gone far enough. Hold on, though! Jesus did not mean 490 times and

Peter knew this. What Jesus was saying by the use of the number seven, which is the number of perfection in antiquity, was, "You should forgive seventy times seven times seventy to infinity." In other words, there are to be no limits on the amount of times you forgive, for God has not set any limits on forgiving. But in another way, this thought crushes us. "You mean, Jesus, I must forgive even when I don't feel like it? Even when it hurts?" And Jesus says, "Yes, indeed!" An interesting factor in forgiveness is that it not only does something for the one forgiven, but it does something also for the person who is doing the forgiving. It's freeing.

So, what is the problem? Jesus followed his answer to Peter's question with a wonderful story of a man who owed his king 10,000 talents. This was equal to 15 years of wages to a laborer in that day. The man pleaded for the king to have patience, and he would repay him everything. The king had pity on this man, and he forgave him his total ...debt. Indeed, this man was greatly pleased!

The story continues. This forgiven man was out walking, and he came up to another servant. This servant owed him 100 denarii, about a day's wages. And what do you suppose this newly forgiven man did about this? He grabbed the debtor by the throat, and he said to him, "Pay what you owe!" This owing servant pleaded with the forgiven man. "Have patience with me and I will repay you." But the forgiven man refused to be moved and had the other servant thrown into debtor's prison. Can you believe it? Here was a person forgiven a ...debt of what amounts to 15 years of work, and he was not willing to forgive a debt owed to him of one day's work.

The issue here is - you have been forgiven by Almighty God and can it be that you are not willing to merely forgive a fellow human being? The debt you owe to God was uncountable, and yet you've received forgiveness. Now, when you're in the trenches, is it possible that you won't forgive someone who has wronged you?

This is almost beyond comprehension. And yet we struggle here, we who have been forgiven by God. Forgiveness is not passive resignation to a bad situation. Rather, forgiveness is to be a positive, joyful activity in which we change from seeing ourselves as victims to seeing ourselves as victors. Forgiveness enables us to see the presence of the Divine in our lives is perceived in forgiving others. Sure, people can be cruel. And there are those who will never ask for now want forgiveness, and they glory in your pain. There are times when you need to let go of all that heartbreak and forgive the past. Now, if you don't like the word forgive for this, use another word--let go, break free--but allow yourself to be free from the past hurt and pain that has gone on without reconciliation.

It takes two to reconcile. It takes one to forgive. You are not excusing the action. You are not ignoring the wrong, the sin committed and the person responsible. You are not eclipsing justice. What you are doing is setting yourself free from the weight of harm that you have carried far too long. Over the years I've seen otherwise wonderful people dragged down into despair with no chance for reconciliation and they just kept hold of the anger and harm, not knowing what to do with it, ever reliving the pain, allowing the perpetrator, long gone, to continue to hold them in his or her power. Forgive. Let it go. Release it! Throw it out! Take back the God-given power you have for your own life. For some, the time is right. For others, it will take time and healing. Perhaps you need to talk with someone, but take control.

Forgiveness is not weakness. It is not passive, not gutless. Forgiveness is healthful. Forgiveness is freeing. It may take time. And it may be one-sided. But it will release you. It will set you free! So be it. *Amen.*