

"Decide to Forgive!"

Jeremiah 31:31-34
February 28, 2010

Matthew 18:21-22
St. James UCC

Preached by Rev. Dr. Robert Matlack

You have heard many times how God made a covenant with the Israelite people, a covenant that they would be God's people, that they would follow God's commandments and that they would always seek to be faithful in the ways that they lived. Yet, we have also heard many times how that is not what happened in reality. Time after time the Israelite people would stumble and falter in their efforts to be faithful. Temptations of one kind or another would seem so very appealing, and they would succumb. Many of their neighbors worshiped false gods, and the Israelite people often found this practice tempting.

As we read through the Old Testament we follow the ebbs and flows of the Israelite's efforts to be faithful. They are faithful for a while, remembering and appreciating all that God has done for them, but then something else comes along, some other temptation, and they drift away - only to be called back by one of the great prophets, and by the circumstances of their lives.

If God had been unwilling to forgive, this relationship with the Israelite people, and indeed the whole history of the people would have been brief indeed. But as we read through the Old Testament, we are reminded that God was willing to forgive them time after time after time. Even when it seemed like they shouldn't need another chance, God was willing to forgive.

It is in that context that we hear Peter's question to Jesus, "Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him?" This is an honest question by someone who genuinely wanted to be faithful. We find the question a little bit odd today in that we usually don't think in terms of a specific number of times that we are obligated to forgive. Yet Peter lived as one who sought to faithfully follow the laws that had been given to the Jewish people. These laws were an obligation that he willingly accepted and sought to be faithful to. It is in that context that he asks for a definition of what his obligation is under the law.

We should also note that Peter is willing to be generous in his defining of that obligation. Over the centuries many Jewish scholars had discussed this obligation to forgive in an effort to define it, and the general consensus was that to forgive someone three times was an acceptable maximum, not a minimum but a maximum - the most that could be expected. When you have forgiven someone 3 times, then your obligation under the law has clearly been fulfilled. No one could reasonably expect more. But Peter in asking his question "how many times do I have to forgive him?" Also added, "seven times". He was volunteering a willingness to forgive over twice as many times as the law seemed to require, yet his jaw must have dropped at Jesus' response, for this still this was not nearly enough.

Jesus took Peter's question and with his answer moved the discussion to a whole new context. For when Jesus replied that Peter should forgive seventy times seven he wasn't just saying that his interpretation of the Law was that we are obligated to forgive 490 times, rather than three times. Rather, Jesus was saying that we should forgive and forgive and forgive.

How many of us would seriously try to keep track as to the number of times we have forgiven someone, and literally count up to four hundred and ninety without losing track? If for some

reason we actually did that, and we got to the four hundred and ninetieth time of forgiving them, would one more really matter that much? Would the 491st time be that much different?

Of course not, for Jesus is not trying to give a new law or a new definition to the existing law, instead Jesus is trying to get us to focus on the spirit instead of the letter of the law. How many times has God forgiven the Israelite people? How many times has God forgiven us? If 3 or even 7 were to be the most that could be expected, then the limit would have been reached long ago. If 490 were to be the new maximum, would that even be enough for our relationship with God? I think not.

We are blessed because God has been willing to forgive and forgive and forgive. We have not yet run out of chances. God is still willing to forgive us, so how can we do any less? How can we offer our neighbors less forgiveness than we accept from God? How can we put a limit on our willingness to forgive and say that I will only forgive them 10 times, while expecting that God will keep forgiving us whenever we need it, whenever we truly repent and turn to God, because we do expect to be forgiven.

You know forgiveness is not easy! Very few if any things are harder. And one reason why forgiveness is so hard is that often we try in all sincerity to forgive others because we have been told that we should do so, but we don't really have any very clear understanding of exactly why we should be forgiving. That kind of forgiveness doesn't give us much satisfaction because it doesn't go deep enough. "We dutifully bury the hatchet", as someone once put it, "but we don't forget where we buried it".

In our text from Jeremiah God talks about a new covenant between God and all the people, a covenant which will not depend upon a few to lead the rest of the people in the right direction, rather it is a covenant in which all will know God. It will be written in the hearts of all people, for it is a covenant of love. As part of that covenant, God says, "I will forgive their sins and I will no longer remember their wrongs". The sins will be forgotten as well as forgiven. That is how God has pledged to treat us.

In his book, Lee: The Last Years, Charles Bracelen Flood reports that after the Civil War, Robert E. Lee visited a Kentucky lady who took him to the remains of a grand old tree in front of her house. There she bitterly cried that its limbs and trunk had been destroyed by Federal Artillery fire. She looked to Lee for a word condemning the North or at least sympathizing with her loss.

After a brief silence, Lee said, "Cut it down, my dear Madam, and forget it."

The choice that she faced was clear, to keep looking at that tree day after day, to keep alive the resentment, the sense of injustice, the bitterness she felt over the past, allowing that to shape the days of her future or to leave it behind and move on. What had already happened could not be changed. Yet what could be changed was her attitude as she walked into the future. She could keep reliving the pain of the past, allowing that bitterness to take root and poison the rest of her life, or she could cut the tree down, leaving the past behind her and moving ahead to new opportunities and possibilities.

When God forgives us, the message is one that says that we are not bound by the mistakes of the past. We don't have to keep reliving and remaking the same mistakes. In deciding to forgive us,

God frees us to live today and tomorrow differently. Our future doesn't have to be poisoned and shaped by the bitterness of the mistakes we made yesterday, or even by the wrongs that someone else did to us. Today and tomorrow hold new opportunities, new possibilities... if we will open ourselves to them.

Yet sometimes we tie ourselves to the bitterness of the past by our own reluctance to forgive others as we have been forgiven. We bind ourselves to the past as well as binding them when we do so. Our lives are slowly poisoned - not so much by what they have done to us, as by our own unwillingness to leave yesterday's mistakes in the past, our own reluctance to forgive and forget, just as God has forgiven and forgotten our sins.

I would like to close with part of poem written by Robert Muller. The poem is titled, "Decide to forgive"

Decide to forgive
For resentment is negative
Resentment is poisonous
Resentment diminishes and devours the self.
Be the first to forgive,
To smile and to take the first step,
And you will see happiness bloom
On the face of your human brother or sister.
Be always the first
Do not wait for others to forgive
For by forgiving
You become the master of fate
The fashioner of life
The doer of miracles.
To forgive is the highest
Most beautiful form of love
In return you will receive
Untold peace and happiness.

Amen.