

Forgiveness

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the embodiment of God's Love, Jesus Christ our Savior, amen.

Well, God's Word certainly doesn't hesitate at the starting line nor avoid those elephants in the room that can sometimes appear like land mines. Jesus doesn't mince any words when explaining how to handle broken relationships and conflict in the Church. In our scripture for today Jesus describes what we're supposed to do when someone sins or transgresses against us. In this example Jesus says the one who was hurt in the relationship, the victim, if you will, should be the one to take the first step toward forgiveness. Lest you think that lets you off the hook for making your apologies when you're the one who caused the transgression, I'll take a short minute to remind you what Jesus said all the way back in the 5th chapter of Matthew... He said if you're at Church and about to give your offering when you realize a brother or sister has something against you, then leave your offering and go to that person... In this case Jesus is talking about the offender going to the offended. In the Kingdom of God, it doesn't seem to matter who offended whom, both are responsible to make the first move to go to the other person. You see when Humankind had fallen so far into sin and decay there was no humanly way out, God made the first move to reconcile humans to Himself. God so loved you and me that He became one of us so that all of us might gain eternal life. That's one huge first move...

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God's first move was so selfless and sacrificial it was the greatest gift in all of history. So, now that we're all recipients of God's lavish mercy and grace, now what are we going to do? Do we just soak up all that forgiveness and keep it to ourselves? Unfortunately, more times than I'd like to admit that's exactly how I act and I strongly suspect I'm not alone in this... The unconditional love I bask in every day of my life hasn't completely softened this old heart of stone. I'm still pretty stingy with my forgiveness. I tend to treat forgiveness as if it's a limited supply item like the blueberry yogurt I have such a hard time trying to find in the stores. The reality is when we forgive it's not our supply of forgiveness we're using. We forgive because we were first forgiven. We love because we were first loved. It's God's divine nature to forgive because that's what divine love looks like. Since making the first move to forgive is God's nature, God wants and indeed expects his Children to do likewise.

The beginning of this scripture text is what scholars refer to as Church Discipline. We're told this is what we're supposed to do when there's a conflict between two members. It's quite a process... Then after describing the process, Jesus goes on to say that when the process doesn't work, treat your opponent like a tax collector or a Gentile... Before we move on, I remind you Jesus included tax collectors and even ate with them. Jesus healed the daughter of a woman only identified as a Gentile. So, the end result is not to excommunicate the unrepentant

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sinner, but to redouble our efforts at including them, praying for them, and blessing them. Since Jesus doesn't stop there, we can assume even this radical inclusion, prayer, and blessing them still fails, then and only then is it permissible to bring out the big gun. What's the "Big Gun" you ask? Jesus went on to say, "Whatever you lose on earth will be loosed in heaven and what you bind on earth will be bound in heaven..." Pow! The power to loosen or bind up the sins of others. That's a huge responsibility never to be undertaken lightly. After the conflict resolution process, after the time of radical inclusion, prayer, and blessing then you can consider binding this person to their sin. That's called the Office Of The Keys if you remember your catechism days. The power to bind or loosen the demands of the Law doesn't reside with one or two people or even with any individual Church Council. Jesus gives the Office of the Keys to the entire Church.

Here's the funny thing about the Office of the Keys. I don't think God ever intends for them to be used. Here's what I mean. Immediately after telling the disciples they have this power to bind and loosen the sins of others, Peter blurts out this silly question about how many times we have to forgive our brother or sister. I'm sure he thought he was being exceedingly generous when he said up to 7 times... Jesus was quick rebuke Peter, saying no, my friend, you're a little short on the forgiveness scale. In our Bible's translation it says 77 times. In the Greek it's hard to determine if Jesus meant 77 times or 7 times 70 times. That

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would be 490 times to forgive for the same offence. In either case, 77 times or 490 times, Jesus is telling Peter, the disciples, and you and me that we must forgive as many times as it takes. Today, Jesus might have said an infinite number of times. If we're to offer forgiveness infinitely, no matter if you're the perpetrator or the victim, then there would be no need for the disciplinary process, nor the need for the Office of the Keys. All of this elaborate process for kissing and making up within the Church comes under the heading Fallen world. Under the Reign of God all this is just so unnecessary.

Are you holding on to any grudges from the past? Are you withholding your forgiveness from someone? If you are, you are hindering your entrance into the Kingdom of God here on earth right here and right now... Forgiveness is the key and you've held it in your hand all along. I'm not going to stand up here and tell you how easy this whole forgiveness thing is. Forgiving someone who caused you great harm is hard to do. I mean, it's really hard to do! In fact, from my own experience with forgiving others, it's down right humanly impossible. If it were humanly possible we would have no need for a savior. When the hurts are so bad and the wrong cuts so deep it becomes impossible for us to forgive of our own power or strength. From the cross, Jesus prayed to His Father and our Father when he said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." When the world comes crashing in because of the actions or

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inaction of someone else and it's impossible for you to forgive, may I suggest you do what Jesus did? When I can't forgive out of my own supply of forgiveness or even out of the love I have in my heart, I can still ask God to do for me what I can't do on my own. God, in the Name of Jesus, please forgive this person for they don't even know what they did..." Those are the most powerful words in the English language. Not, I forgive you, but rather Father, forgive them...

May you find time this Lenten Season to reflect on those you need to forgive and those to whom you might owe an apology. May you be the first to make the move toward forgiveness and if possible, reconciliation. When the hurt is too fresh or too deep, may you follow the example of Jesus our Lord and give those hurts over to God our Father who art in heaven. May His love fill all the places in your heart where resentment or grudges used to reside so you can reflect God's grace in a world God loved enough to die for. Amen.