

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who came to forgive our sin, Jesus Christ Our Lord, Amen.

Last week we began our sermon series on this book of Second Corinthians and I told you about some references to other visits by Paul and other letters Paul had written that have been lost in time, but that are mentioned in this letter we call Second Corinthians. In today's reading we have both a reference to Paul's visit and that letter of tears I spoke of last week. We also get a bit of a clue as to the trouble Paul faced during that whole period and what he thinks the Corinthian Church should do about it.

Paul grieved that his beloved church at Corinth had followed another person's interpretation of Christianity rather than the Gospel he had preached and taught while he was with them. There was division in the Church and Paul had tried to help them return to the Gospel he had taught, but to no avail, at least at first... His efforts were obstructed by an unnamed person who had apparently been called out and identified. How fortunate for the Corinthian Church to know the source of their conflict. Rarely is the actual source responsible for spreading drama and conflict among the Church family easily identified and even rarer is the source dealt with in a kind, but effective manner. In this case we don't know what the person said or did, but we know what Paul asked the Corinthians to do.

Paul writes to his beloved congregation asking them to reaffirm their love for him—to forgive him. Isn't that the basic principle of our faith? Forgiveness... Last week I said the Church at its best is God's house of love. This week we learn a little more about what that means and how it works out on the ground, in action within a community of faith. The Church isn't just God's House of Love in name only, but in actual words and deeds too. I don't believe you can be a House of Love without also being a House of Forgiveness. Paul was so concerned about this unnamed person and how his Christian brothers and sisters would treat him that he took the time and great expense to write to them about the situation. Imagine back then the effort to get a written letter from one city to another. Paul dictated to a scribe and sealed the letter. He gave it to a trusted companion to hand carry from Macedonia all the way to Corinth, a distance of some 250 or more miles. There were no text messages, emails, or tweets. These kind of personal letters were hand carries and read aloud by the person delivering the letter in front of the entire congregation. That's the importance Paul placed on keeping good relationships within the Church. Paul was concerned that if the congregation shunned this man or treated him cruelly there could be a danger of suicide.

The Air Force and the military in general, have a problem with suicide. The rates of suicide are much higher for active duty members and veterans than in the civilian population. When I was an investigator on the Inspector General's staff,

we had a policy that after interviewing anyone during one of our investigations, whether they were the target, suspect, or just a witness, we never released them unless their First Sergeant or Commander came to be with them. There were too many times when a person knew we were closing in on discovering the truth and they were going to be in trouble and so, rather than facing the consequences, they would commit suicide. The thought is that by handing them off to a member of their own squadron or unit they would be less likely have the opportunity to take their own lives. The reality is that even back in their own unit, many times, the person under investigation was shunned. Even among their own brothers and sisters in arms they still had no place to turn for love or acceptance. They were, or at least felt like they were, outcasts. Nobody wanted to be associated with the person who was in trouble. As a result, they were treated as less than whole, less than a human being. So, even after a successful hand off to the First Sergeant or Commander the person still felt there was nowhere to go and no one to turn to. Far too often this scenario still to this day results in a suicide or attempted suicide.

Paul seeks to find a way for even known troublemakers to be reconnected to a loving community because all the way back to biblical times, every life matters. The Church can't be whole or complete without every soul, every brother and every sister being made an indispensable part. Even the parts we would rather be rid of from time to time are parts that make us a complete and whole community...

I've also seen how this works out in a Christian Community. Many years ago, long before I went to seminary there was a couple who were very active in the congregation we started to attend when we moved into this town. They helped out in the feeding ministry, the wife sang in the choir, they never missed a Sunday or a Wednesday worship. When we joined the church, they quickly befriended us and being new, we rather enjoyed the attention they lavished on us. Unfortunately, we were unaware this couple was actually very needy and after they got to know you, they began to take advantage of your friendship. They didn't have boundaries and refused any attempt to establish them. Over time we began to see how destructive this couple was to the harmony of the entire community. We tried everything we knew how to help them learn appropriate behaviors, but they couldn't seem to fit in. After several years this couple was finally asked to leave the congregation by the lead pastor. I still wonder what, if anything we or the congregation could have done differently that might have healed their relationship with the congregation. This couple had been forgiven over and over, yet they continued to undermine the ministries and mission of the congregation. At what point does a congregation just say enough is enough...

As I look back on that situation, I realize the bigger problem was that nobody ever recognized the bigger issue. Yes, this couple was disruptive, but how you react during and after the disruption makes a difference. That congregation

mostly ignored the issues. They all knew how these two people were, yet they allowed new members to be drawn into their web of drama. I'm not saying someone should have alerted us or warned us not to become friends with them, but a healthy congregation, like a healthy human body must have a strong immune system. Apparently, this couple had been acting in this manner for quite some time before we ever moved into town. Why hadn't they been referred to counselling or been rebuked by the council long before we arrived on the scene? Just like in cancer patients, many times if you catch problems when they're small you can usually treat the disease before it becomes terminal. Perhaps intervention at a much earlier point might have been able to keep this couple in the community, but I know for certain ignoring their behavior until it was completely out of control led to their excommunication from that congregation.

I can say that during my time here at Trinity we've weathered a few storms together. Although we're not perfect when it comes to the manner in which we deal with drama and conflict, Trinity does have an exceptionally good immune system and this congregation is able to for the most part address conflict before it becomes relationship ending.

Forgiveness is always difficult. Sometimes when we're offended, we act like small children and threaten to take our toys and go home. That might make you feel better for a while, but it fractures or totally ends the relationship.

Learning to forgive takes those fractured relationships and makes them whole again. It restores the one who offended back to equality and makes the community complete. Forgiveness doesn't mean we ignore continued bad behavior, but rather we work to include everyone where their gifts can be used to God's Glory while teaching and showing what real love and forgiveness can be. Forgiveness doesn't mean no consequences. That's cheap grace. Real forgiveness helps the offender overcome their error and teaches them another way. Real forgiveness doesn't just say, "Oh, that's all right." And moves on. That's sticking your head in the sand and taking a coward's way out. Real forgiveness is always inclusive and always instructive; teaching and showing the one in error in great love, how to improve. They may never be perfect, in fact, they will never be perfect, but they, and we, can all improve and do better today than we did yesterday. As long as sinful humans make up the Church, there will always be a need for forgiveness. Think of it as your Christian job security and don't forget to thank God for all those times when you needed to be forgiven too... You are their Christian job security too...

May God continue to make us better at forgiving one another. May each of us find the love to forgive that one person who just rubs you the wrong way. May God bless even our feeble efforts to forgive for the sake of the Gospel we proclaim. May this house be known as God's House of Love and Forgiveness.

Amen.