

KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH (UCC)

Sunday, August 20, 2023

Sermon - "Forgiveness is not Tidy"

Rev. Irene Willis Hassan

Scriptures:

Genesis 45:1-15 & Matthew 18:15-22

Genesis 45:1-15 NRSV Translation read by Vernon Pang
Joseph Reveals Himself to His Brothers

45 Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. **2** And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. **3** Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. **5** And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. **6** For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. **7** God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to keep alive for you many survivors. **8** So it was not you who sent me here but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. **9** Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me; do not delay. **10** You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. **11** I will provide for you there, since there are five more years of famine to come, so that you and your household and all that you have will not come to poverty.' **12** And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. **13** You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." **14** Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. **15** And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them, and after that his brothers talked with him.

Matthew 18:15-22

Reproving Another Who Sins

15 "If your brother or sister sins against you, [h] go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one. **16** But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. **17** If that person refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector. **18** Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. **19** Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. **20** For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

21 Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” **22** Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven[a] times.

Sermon - Forgiveness is not Tidy

Have you ever tried to forgive someone who doesn't deserve it, or isn't sorry?

When I was working at IHS, there was a woman in the shelter that didn't match the stereotype of a homeless person. We'll call her “Julia”. She was clean cut and maintained typical social cues. By all accounts, she didn't match the narrative we have of homeless people as being filthy, strange, and difficult.

So why was she homeless? Julia was in this situation because of resentment. She had a major rift happen with her family over her recently passed mother's inheritance and the situation left her feeling victimized and alienated from those she loved most. Her brothers had asked their mother during a time of weakness and low mental faculty to write Julia out of the will so they could get a larger portion of the inheritance. She was so broken by the betrayal that she couldn't maintain a job or a home. Much like Joseph, whose brothers had left him for dead, Julia found herself cast into a foreign land of grief and confusion.

Now, we as a culture value forgiveness. A seemingly obvious ministry to deliver this suffering woman was to preach the value of forgiveness as a way of “self-help” past crippling resentment. When there's conflict, we as a society seem to expect forgiveness to happen as the ultimate closure for conflict to resolve. From individual injustices to community ones, we often don't feel like a story sits well until the closure of forgiveness has occurred. We want things to be polite, tidy, easy. Unfortunately, life often is none of those things. All of us who have experienced resentment know it's easier said than done to release an unresolved hurt.

But the thing is, God never asked Joseph to forgive his brothers. When I encountered people like Julia in the shelters, whose primary setback to stability was the resentments they held, I almost never preached forgiveness to them in the “self-help” pop culture style that we expect from ourselves and each other in the wake of resentment. Why not? Firstly, it can be danger-ous advice. Victims of domestic violence who are asked to forgive often get trapped in a loop with their abusers, who get increasingly bold in what they find they can get away with. Domestic violence victims die after following such vapid recommendations. Active addicts are given permission to continue their destructive ways when vacantly forgiven by their families. So why do we urge forgiveness in these situations? God never told Joseph to forgive his brothers in a similar situation of betrayal, so why should Julia, or the domestic violence victim, or the addict's family, have to do it?

Secondly, “self-help” is not what Jesus taught us about forgiveness. Jesus was not some personal enlightenment guru with a peace sign on his t-shirt, flippantly ignoring the injustices of the world in favor of some uneasy peace and platitudes about self-love. When only used in the shortsighted context of self-help, forgiveness does very little to hold accountable perpetrators and risks further isolating victims. I read an article by theologian Marie Mayo reflecting on the aftermath of the 2012

Aurora Colorado movie theater mass shooting. She states that a reporter asked one of the survivors in the hospital if they would ever be able to forgive the shooter, which if you think about it, is a tone deaf thing to ask.

Why are we so focused on forgiveness, even when the victims lie broken in hospital beds? It seems like it's a way to make ourselves feel better about the terrible things that happen in this world and sweep the tension under the rug, rather than a realistic solution for creating a world where the captives are free and love prevails, as God intends for us in His Kingdom. To view Jesus' teachings on forgiveness in such a sanitized condition does not only an injustice for the victimized among us by sweeping their abuse cycle under the rug, but dilutes the amazing wisdom of the Gospel.

So what *does* the Bible say about forgiveness, if it's not the modernized self-help enlightenment stuff that we so often internalize today? And why does the definition of forgiveness matter for how we live out our faith?

Last week, I preached about how God calls the faithful into doing great things, even and especially in the face of enormous loss or tribulation. What I didn't talk about was the framework that we need to build in ourselves as a community to make those miracles happen. Churches fail and close all the time, not out of lack of passion for the Gospel or love of Jesus – but because they didn't install a cohesive community foundation for the Spirit to use. Prayerfully navigating forgiveness, resentment, and how God expects us to deal with each other in times of conflict, is one of those essential parts of creating that foundation.

In Matthew 18, Jesus outlines a plan of action for resolving conflict in a community: Firstly, talk individually with the person who hurt you. If they can't hear you, bring witnesses. If they still can't hear you, bring the whole church into it, and if they still can't hear you, expel that person from the community. Jesus repeats variances of this plan during and after a conflict elsewhere, as well – in Luke 6 and Luke 17, Jesus recommends for the offender to repent, and if the offender does so, then the victim should forgive plentifully. The word “repent” in Hebrew translates to “teshuva,” which means to “turn around” – the offender is expected to change in order for the forgiveness to be issued.

In the story from Genesis, we're witness to a pivotal moment in which Joseph reconciles with his murderous brothers. Although the text doesn't explicitly say he forgives them until several chapters later, the issuance of that forgiveness seems to be implied by the tearful embrace. Joseph states that he is reconciling so that their father can witness how successful Joseph has been. There's a motive of justice through Joseph's renewal as the reason for the reconciliation; he's not forgiving to “keep the peace” or “let go of anger.”

In these examples of conflict closure and forgiveness in the Bible, forgiveness involves a transaction. It's not free. Even Jesus' famous quote of “turn the other cheek” doesn't imply our current cultural sense of forgiveness. Theologian Walter Wink points out that if you are hit with the offender's right hand and you turn your other cheek to him, you're essentially asking the offender to hit you with their left hand. In the ancient Middle East, touching another person with your left hand would render you unable to pray or enter sacred spaces, as this is the hand you would use for bathroom activities. It's your unclean hand, and by offering someone who is beating

you to hit you with that hand, you are turning their own offense against them. The verse is not about forgiveness – it's about accountability.

Even God doesn't forgive unconditionally, as we see in the story of the unrepentant slave. The King, who in the parable represents God, takes back his forgiveness of the slave when he sees that the slave didn't change his behavior as a result of the forgiveness. God's grace, though undeserved, is dependent on our willingness to change.

You see, forgiveness isn't simply a fortuitous self-help tool to soothe ourselves. God doesn't expect empty forgiveness for individual self-soothing or efficient tidiness of social problems. God expects changed behavior in the wake of injustice and conflict, and for the gift of His Grace to ignite "teshuva" or *turning around* in those who perpetuate harm. Christianity isn't meant to be something that creates polite, tidy people – atheists can be polite, forgiving, and have a good moral compass. Christianity instead seeks to transform the broken world into the Kingdom of Heaven, and we are called to participate in that vision. God's Grace expects radical change in those who chose to turn to Him in faith.

And for radical change to happen, we need to do away with the tidiness of modern forgiveness sensibilities and instead be willing to live into the messiness of accountability. It's hard to tell someone they hurt you, right? It's even harder to recover and walk a journey to newness when there's no apology given for that hurt. Any addict, cancer survivor, or refugee could tell you that learning how to live into a new life after dramatic loss or trauma can be extremely messy. We need to be willing to stand with each other through painful changes, to name the sins that divide us, and endure the messiness of re-learning how to live into God's calling for us after a conflict. We have to be willing to be accountable to each other, even when it's hard, even when we'd rather just politely sweep it under the rug. We have to be willing to listen, learn, and grow, in order to create the community that God calls us to become.

It's not the unresolved grievances that we're asked to forgive. Instead, we're asked to forgive the messiness of the transformation that happens when we repent for our sins and begin putting together the pieces of a new life. We need to be able to walk alongside the pain of the Julias of the world, the unresolved conflict, and not feel compelled to sanitize it. We need to be able to talk to each other through our differences and be open to hearing we were wrong, and talk through that discomfort together instead of up and leaving the church over it. Indeed, we should be forgiving the messiness of willingness to step into renewal not only 7 times, but 70 times 7.

Working through the messiness of renewal together is the goal of forgiveness. Figuring out what the renewal looks like after a period of loss, conflict, and repentance, is the saving work of the cross. For us Christians, forgiveness should create accountability that turns us as individuals and as a community toward God. It can't just be a vacant action to keep the peace when there is no peace. We are accountable to each other because we are called to help build God's Kingdom. And if turning toward God isn't the goal of forgiveness, then forgiveness isn't something God asks of us. We have some serious work to do, and that serious work can't be built on superficial relationships and platitudes designed to maintain an uneasy peace. That work involves the messiness of renewal.

So what did I say to Julia, if not for her to forgive? I told Julia that God would be there in the messiness and He would have the tools to clean it up, just like in the story of Joseph. She didn't have to focus her energy on forgiving her brothers because God's transformative grace handles that better than we ever could. Even when we can't forgive, we know that God will call us into something greater if we just have faith. And that I would stand with her while she and God worked through the messiness of renewal together.

Be gentle with each other, be kind, loving, and compassionate. But I ask you also to be willing to be uncomfortable, allow messiness, and have hard conversations with each other. Forgiveness isn't an attempt to be tidy, polite, and easy. Forgiveness is God's invitation to change and be made new. God has big plans for us, and we are required to be intentional in our relationships with each other and with Him as we do the work of unfolding those plans.

Amen.

IMPORTANT NOTICE



Aloha Hawai'i Conference UCC 'ohana,

In a time of crisis as Maui has endured, it is good for us to come together as 'ohana and join in prayer and shared tears and hope.

The Hawai'i Conference is hosting a **Prayer for Maui** online service today, **Sunday, August 20 at 4 p.m. HST**. We hope you will join us by Zoom or YouTube.

Join "Prayer for Maui" on Zoom (Meeting ID: 826 6631 2487)

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82666312487>

View on YouTube: <https://youtube.com/live/NJCtn1PvcBM?feature=share>

Clergy and laity on Maui will help to lead the service and we'll be joined by Karen Georgia Thompson, General Minister and President of the UCC; and Traci Blackmon, Associate General Minister of the UCC. It will be a time of scripture readings and prayers shared by the full Conference as we all feel the impact of these devastating fires.