

SERMON TITLE: "I Believe in Forgiveness"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 23:32-43
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: February 24, 2019, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

In my reading this week, I came across a story an author was telling about his childhood. David and his two brothers had been climbing on their landlord's cherry tree. The boys knew they were forbidden to swing on the branches, but young David did it anyway until "the loud crack with which the branch snapped sounded like the thunder of Judgment Day." David wanted very much to avoid the wrath that was certainly coming, but knew he had to drag himself up the stairs to his German landlord's flat. Years later, David described it like this:

Our landlord's figure, tall and haggard, filled the doorframe as I stood there mumbling my confession. If the roof had fallen in at that moment . . . it would have been a relief. Herr . . . Baumgartner was known to be a man of few words. 'Oy weh!' he said. Just that: 'Oy weh!' . . . But then, as I looked up at him, he gave me a broad smile. I think he also ruffled my hair with his heavy hand. But the smile was the great gift with which he sent me away, the gift of forgiveness.¹

Over the past two months, we have been making our way through *The Apostles' Creed*, affirming our belief in God our Creator; Jesus our suffering, dead, risen, and ascended Lord; the Holy Spirit; and the Church. Today I invite you to consider with me what it means to say, "I believe in forgiveness."

1—FORGIVENESS AFTER REPENTANCE

To get us started, let's think about the story from the Gospel of Luke about Jesus and the thief on the cross. The most obvious kind of forgiveness we see there is forgiveness that comes after repentance. The thief admits or confesses that he has done wrong. He knows that his deeds deserve punishment. Until faced with death on the cross, the thief may not have cared whom he hurt or that he blamed others for his wrongdoing. But now, at least, in his last hours, this one thief owns up to his crimes and sinfulness. He expresses his repentance and then is forgiven by Jesus.

We who believe in forgiveness probably like this kind of forgiveness best. This type of forgiveness is the most balanced and mutual. In an attempt to right what's wrong, each person offers something to mend what is broken. The repentant person first admits the truth of their guilt and the genuineness of their regret and sorrow. The forgiving person then lays on the table the hopeful possibility of a positive relationship that goes forward into the future.

We're fortunate when both of these elements of repentance and forgiveness occur. Of course, they don't always. I remember my first paying job as a young kid. A lady hired me to dust her living room. That included many little nick knacks and figurines. I did this dusting while the lady and my mom were visiting in the dining room. Beyond their sight, I accidentally dropped one of the lady's figurines and broke it. Instead of telling her, I just set the pieces back together the best I could and pretended that all was well. The next time my mom and I went to that lady's house, she showed me and my mom the broken figurine. The lady was disappointed in me, she said, not so much that I had broken the item, but that I hadn't confessed what had happened. I don't recall dusting anything else at that lady's house, so I'm assuming she fired me. She didn't want to be in any future relationship with me as her employee.

That was an important lesson for me to learn as I developed my belief in forgiveness. Whether we're talking about person-to-person forgiveness or forgiveness from God, the most mutually-satisfying forgiveness comes after repentance.

2—FORGIVENESS PRIOR TO REPENTANCE

Fortunately, however, the Luke 23 story also shows that forgiveness is sometimes extended even prior to repentance. This is what Jesus did when he said, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they're doing." In praying this prayer, Jesus was offering mercy for the sins of those who arrested, beat, and crucified him. Jesus was erasing the guilt of those who cursed and mocked him and cast lots to divide up his clothes. The people who put Jesus on the cross probably thought they were in the right and had no reason to

repent. They weren't wanting any kind of positive future relationship with Jesus. I'm sure they weren't looking for any forgiveness from him. And, yet, Jesus offered it to them.

For those who were executing and ridiculing Jesus, this act of forgiveness probably meant nothing at the time. But later on, if those people ever came to have regrets, remorse, or sorrow for what they had done—possibly they would remember Jesus' loving words. Possibly they would be able to accept his grace-filled gesture. Possibly they would understand that, even though Jesus was no longer speaking from the cross, his prayer to God was still in effect. Even though the soldiers and authorities knew nothing yet about Jesus' resurrection and his on-going life with God, maybe they would believe that Jesus' request would still be honored by God. Maybe they would come to believe that, if God could forgive them, then maybe they could forgive themselves.

I'm so glad these details about Jesus' crucifixion are included in Luke's gospel. All these centuries later, we get to hear these words of forgiveness and claim them for ourselves. We need this assurance of divine mercy because who among us hasn't perpetrated injustice and harm on an innocent human being? Who among us hasn't disrespected Jesus in some small or huge way? Who among us hasn't, in some sense, nailed Jesus to the cross? Whether we are repentant now, become repentant later, or never come to that spiritual place—Jesus has already forgiven us, God has already forgiven us, and the opening is there for us to accept that forgiveness for ourselves.

3—FORGIVENESS THAT WE OFFER

So far, I've been talking about the kind of forgiveness that we receive—forgiveness from other people, from God, and from ourselves. When I say, "I believe in forgiveness," I definitely include that kind of forgiveness that relieves *me* of *my* guilt, makes *me* clean, and gives *me* a fresh start. But there's another kind of forgiveness that I believe in, as well. And that's the kind of forgiveness that *we* offer to *other people*.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus would forgive people who were thieves and murderers? Why would Jesus offer forgiveness to the Jewish and Roman authorities who were torturing and killing him? I

would be scared and angry, wouldn't you? Wouldn't you think the powerful Son of God would want to revel, for at least a few minutes, in hatred and rage-filled thoughts of divine-level retribution? But maybe Jesus didn't want to go to his grave feeling scared and angry and hateful. Maybe he wanted to get past those feelings which may seem powerful for a time, but then become a poison and a burden to the soul. Maybe Jesus wanted to feel the even greater power of love and the freedom and strength of offering forgiveness.

When we have been hurt by someone, we sometimes feel like we have a right to dwell on our victimization. We want to nurse our anger and grow our outrage, sometimes way out of proportion to the original wound. When we let resentment fester, however, we usually hurt ourselves more. We turn a skinned knee into a scar for life. Whether or not the person who offended us feels a desire or a need for forgiveness, *we must forgive* if we're going to receive healing for ourselves. We have to *let go* of the trauma and the drama. We have to give up the right to be a victim. We have to untie or unchain ourselves from whatever caused us pain.

Please don't misunderstand me. When I say, "I believe in forgiveness," I'm certainly not saying that we should stay in abusive situations. I'm not advising that we should forget what happened so much that we allow it to happen again. What I'm saying is that when we continue to stay tied to an abusive person *either* by allowing them to hurt us repeatedly *or* by not forgiving them, we stay tangled up in their junk. We have to give ourselves permission to let go. Whether this helps the other person or not, forgiveness is essential for *our own* healing. Fortunately for us, Jesus' example and God's forgiving power make it possible for us to believe in and offer this forgiveness to other people.

CONCLUSION

This week I was reminded of the testimony of a Vietnamese woman who is famous because she was the naked 9-year old girl in a famous Pulitzer Prize-winning photo taken during the Vietnamese War. Maybe you remember that sad photo in which she is running down a road with other Vietnamese people who are obviously in horrible pain and distress. Years later, that woman, Kim Phuc, wrote,

On June 8, 1972, I ran out . . . in my village . . . I saw an airplane getting lower and then four bombs falling down. I saw fire everywhere around me. Then I saw the fire over my body . . . My clothes had been burned off by fire.

I was 9 years old but I still remember my thoughts at that moment: I would be ugly and people would treat me in a different way. My picture was taken in that moment on Road No. 1 from Saigon to Phnom Penh. After a soldier gave me some drink and poured water over my body, I lost my consciousness.

Several days after, I realized that I was in the hospital, where I spent 14 months and had 17 operations.

It was a very difficult time for me when I went home from the hospital. Our house was destroyed; we lost everything and we just survived day by day . . .

The anger inside me was like a hatred as high as a mountain. I hated my life. I hated all people who were normal because I was not normal. I really wanted to die many times.

I spent my daytime in the library [reading] a lot of religious books to find a purpose for my life. One of the books that I read was the Holy Bible.

In Christmas 1982, I accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior. It was an amazing turning point in my life. God helped me to learn to forgive — the most difficult of all lessons. It didn't happen in a day and it wasn't easy. But I finally got it.

Forgiveness made me free from hatred. I still have many scars on my body and severe pain most days but my heart is cleansed.

Napalm is very powerful, but faith, forgiveness, and love are much more powerful. We would not have war at all if everyone could learn how to live with true love, hope and forgiveness.

Kim Phuc closes her story by asking, "If that little girl in the picture can [forgive], ask yourself: Can you?"²

Forgiveness, in all its forms, is a life-giving gift from God. I hope you will join me in making this affirmation: "I believe in forgiveness."

¹David Steindl-Rast, *Deeper than Words: Living the Apostles' Creed* (Doubleday: New York, 2010), pp. 153f.

²www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=91964687, *This I Believe* series, "The Long Road to Forgiveness."