

“On Forgiveness & Friends”

Text: Matthew 18:15-20

I appreciate the marketing and communications work that Jackie Howard does on behalf of our church family...and I appreciate her patience with me...especially my writing ability or sometimes lack thereof.

Jackie was very forgiving of me this week. I submitted an article for *the Messenger* and after having edited my first draft...Jackie suggested that when one sentence approaches eighty words in length...it's probably time to break up the sentence into several smaller ones.

I was telling our almost eight-year old daughter Ana about my almost 80-word sentence over breakfast on Wednesday morning and Ana said to me rather matter-of-factly, “Dad...sounds like that's not a sentence.”

I am grateful for Jackie's patient, forgiving way.

Forgiving...or...forgiveness...is the act of giving up resentment toward someone or something else...the act of letting go of hard feelings and thoughts we associate perhaps with an individual or incident...

To be forgiven by someone is a gift...to forgive someone is a gift. When forgiveness is shared...both the one forgiving as well as the one forgiven benefits greatly.

But to be frank...forgiveness isn't always easy, is it? It's difficult and if we're honest...it's probably not something we do or experience often enough.

I know the idea and act of forgiveness was experienced differently by the folk of the congregation of which Tara and I were part in Pennsylvania.

Last week I shared about the church fire this congregation experienced and about the lone nativity set that survived the fire. I didn't tell you how that fire started.

I will long remember how late in the evening of February 12, 2005, once the fire was contained and effectively put out, the township fire marshal, John Waters, came to explain to me his assessment of our situation. Essentially, his words to me were: "Reverend...it's clear...you've been lit." In other words...the church fire was an act of arson.

A long story with many details short...we soon discovered that one of our own church members started the fire. This man was more mentally-unstable than anyone knew.

And so a process of forgiveness began. For some...I suspect this process may still be a process...this was difficult and challenging. The sense of loss felt by the congregation was great...especially for those whose membership and memories spanned decades. People had sacrificed much to maintain the church's facility...and for many...that which was lost contained memories of some of the key moments of their faith journey.

One might think that the ability to forgive should, especially for Christian folk, come easily. Isn't that what our faith is to be about? But it doesn't always come easily.

Then on October 2, 2006, our community and surrounding communities, as I suspect our national community, was given an example of forgiveness that was and still is powerful.

Charles Roberts entered a one-room, Old-Order Amish school house and approximately forty minutes later ten Amish, female students had been shot. Five of the students were fatally wounded and Roberts had taken his own life.

Almost immediately, contrary to what the media and people might have anticipated, it was clear from the Amish community that the Amish response to this horrific event...was one of forgiveness and love.

On the day of the shooting, a grandfather of one of the murdered Amish girls was heard warning some young relatives not to hate the killer, saying, “We must not think evil of this man.” Another Amish father noted [about Charles Roberts—the murderer], “He had a mother and a wife and a soul and now he’s standing before a just God.”

Long after the actual incident, in an interview with Charles Roberts’ mother whose name is Terri, Terri was asked:

How did the Amish community respond to your family?

On the day that it happened [Terri began], Henry, our Amish neighbor up on the hill, whom I call an “angel in black,” came to our house. My husband provided transportation for the Amish when they needed to travel by car, and he was just devastated.

All day long, my husband couldn’t lift his head. He kept taking a towel and wiping it over his head—he just kept wiping the tears away and couldn’t lift his head up at all.

And then Henry came, and he was the first sign of healing for my husband. He put his hand on my husband’s shoulder, just stood there and comforted and consoled him for an hour. Henry said, “Roberts, we love you,” and just kept affirming and assuring him.

The acceptance we have received from the Amish community is beyond any words. To be able to have a community of people that have been hurt so much by what our son did and yet to have them respond to us the way that they have has been an incredible journey.

Forgiveness. Love.

Sara Moores Campbell has said, “If we invited the power of love to heal our personal wounds and give us the gift of forgiveness, we would give our world a better chance of survival.”

I believe this show of love and forgiveness...as demonstrated by the Nickel Mines Amish community...gives us a glimpse of how serious Jesus was when he talked about forgiveness and love.

To love and to forgive is radical. The essence of our text today is essentially this...**love** and **forgive**.

Scholars debate the string of textual references that are included in today's reading...the bit about *whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven...whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven...if two agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done...*

These may be references to ancient communal customs that I would suggest probably don't have the same significance for us today. Instead...as we look at this text in its broader context...we're given an image of a God who loves and forgives beyond measure and imagination and so we are...you and me...we're challenged by Jesus' words to live likewise.

Just after our text Peter is found asking the question, "How often should I forgive...seven times?" And we all know Jesus' reply: "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." In other words...keep forgiving Peter...don't stop.

What makes Jesus' words powerful and inspired are that he not only preached them...but the story of the gospel tells us that he lived them. After having been abandoned by the very ones with whom he lived and the very ones he taught...the story of Jesus' resurrection could have concluded quite differently.

And yet Matthew tells us at the end of the gospel...without a hint or trace of anger and frustration...the risen Christ empowers the very ones who had denied and left him for dead...the risen Christ...empowers these ones to continue the work of love and forgiveness he lived and embodied.

The meal we're about to share today...reminds us tangibly of the love of God demonstrated through Christ...a love that loves beyond measure...and a love that offers always the opportunity for forgiveness.

Is it difficult to love? Is it difficult to forgive? For sure. *But if we invite the power of love to heal our wounds and give us the gift of forgiveness, we will [like Jesus] give our world a better chance of survival. Amen.*