

Sermon - August 30, 2009

May only the truth be spoken and only the truth be heard. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

God... the Source of all being
Is pure light and pure love...
Light and Love that burns with stunning passion and creativity.
This is where we all come from...
And when the time is fulfilled, this is where we shall return.

But in the mean time, we have been put here, in the created world, playing our part in this passionate activity we call life.

We are children of light and love... and so every so often we do feel God touching us, whispering to us, or perhaps breaking into our life with unexpected power.

One of the ways this happens is when two people fall in love and wish to get married. The shock and power that someone in the world loves you enough that they want to be committed to you for the rest of your lives... The possibility of this is a reflection of God's passionate love for us.

Three weeks ago I did a wedding here at St. James'. The bride looked radiant and the groom looked on top of the world. Anyone who saw them could not miss the fact that they were very much in love. For them, at this moment, love is like a pool that they have both fallen into. It's fun and delightful and totally surrounds them. And this is the experience of love that is so greatly idealized and sought after in our present society. And you can understand why - it feels wonderful. Our media and advertising tend to single out this experience and give it a high profile. So much so that many people spend more time looking for this experience of love than actually loving another. Sometimes we forget that love is not just a noun - it is also a verb.

Part of our role as bearers of the Good News in this society is to remind people, ourselves and others, that love is also a verb. And so in my homily I preached at their wedding yesterday, I reminded them that they had come together in the presence of God and of that congregation to do more than declare that they are in love. They had come there because they desired to make a solemn vow, to love and care for one another, for the rest of your lives, according to God's holy law.

In my experience, there is no commitment greater than this; no commitment that is more difficult; no commitment that is more worthwhile. People getting married are being called on a mysterious journey, where they will experience the highest highs and the lowest lows. It will be both exhilarating and exasperating. There will be forces at work both within them and out in the world that will try to pull them apart. They will get hurt in ways that were never foreseen. They will try to find patience when they are more tired than they have ever been in their life; They will try to understand more than they have ever understood; and they are going to have to forgive more than they have ever.. forgiven.. before.

There's a famous conversation that has been recorded between Jesus and Peter...

The wonderful and impetuous Peter asks, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

At that, I can almost see Peter's mouth hanging open in bewilderment.

This is one of those classic teaching moments of Jesus. He takes what seems to be reasonable by most people's standards (like Peter)... and pushes it way outside the usual boundaries to make an important point.

The point that Jesus is trying to make in this incident is not really the exact number of times that we should forgive someone for the same sin. The point that he is underscoring and highlighting is the incredible importance of forgiveness in our lives both practically and spiritually.

The fact of the matter is that living in this world is often messy. We do hurt one another - often in ways that are unintended. There are so many ways that we can feel wronged or betrayed. It can evoke great feelings of humiliation, hate and anger. And this can happen on a huge range of scale - all the way from a marital argument to a criminal act to a massive terrorist attack like the one that occurred four years ago to this day.

Regardless of the scale, forgiveness is never a simple act. It is never a simple matter of reciting certain words. In fact, in any abusive relationship the reciting of certain words of both sorrow and forgiveness is actually part of the ongoing cycle of abuse.

The definition of forgiveness that I believe to be more robust is this:

Forgiveness is remembering something in a different way.

Whenever we are hurt - whether it be an individual or a group or a nation - there is a certain way that we remember that hurt - a certain way we tell the story (even if only in our own minds). We attach a particular meaning to that hurt and it is surrounded by a whole cluster of powerful feelings. That story becomes part of who we are and it impels us to take certain actions.

But one of the dangers of this is that our memories of hurt and pain can start to dictate everything that we think and feel and do. I don't like using violent images, but our memories of hurt and pain can become like a gun to our head. We are held hostage by those memories. And we have to keep remembering them in the same way or else!

We all know of what this looks like in families who pass hurtfulness on from one generation to another. They are not willing to remember the story in a different way. We all know what this looks like in nations who pass on hurt from one generation to another. Israel and Palestine, India and Pakistan, Catholic and Protestant Ireland. Decades and centuries of anger and violence. The gun has been held to their head for so long it is difficult for them to know what to do otherwise.

In his conversation with Peter, Jesus was trying to convey the spiritual reality that the only way for people to escape from this trap -the only way for relationships to be transformed is through forgiveness - through remembering a hurt in a different way.

Telling the story in a different way might sound something like this:

“Maybe it wasn’t all their fault.”

or this: “It’s true we did not treat them very well either.”

or it might sound like this:

“I don’t want this hurt and anger inside to control my life any more”

This kind of forgiveness is never easy. And it’s never quick. It takes time to decide to remember in a different way. And it takes time and help from others to figure out how you want to tell it differently.

This is the work of love. And it’s not for the faint of heart. Working towards forgiveness takes great courage and commitment – especially in a society that does not encourage and support it. But it’s worth it to try.

The reason why Jesus said to Peter “I tell you seventy-seven times” is not because we should be martyrs or gluttons for punishment. It is because working towards forgiveness will begin to release you from bondage. It will release you from the same story over and over again. It will open up new possibilities for life and love both in you and in others. Jesus shocked Peter because he wanted Peter to understand that it is through forgiveness people can be transformed in truly amazing and powerful ways.

So I have some homework for everyone here today. I would like you to think of a particular way that you have been hurt. It doesn’t have to be a big one – it’s best to start with a smaller one. I want you to think about the way you tell that story. How do you remember it. How do you rehearse it in your mind? And then I want you to start thinking about how you might tell that story in a different way. How might you remember it in a different way?

This might be hard but it’s worth a try.

Forgiveness is not easy. But it is one of the most powerful ways of helping each other feel the pure light and pure love of God. It is one of the most powerful ways of helping us catch a glimpse of the home to which we shall one day return.

INFSHS. Amen.

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