

February 26, 2023: This Day's Sermon – Forgiveness

Readings: Matthew 18:15-35; Psalm 32:1-2

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Let us pray: *God of life, you have called us into the body of Christ to make your love known. Focus our hearts on your purpose and open our eyes when we fall short. Make us vulnerable enough to confront our hurt of one another and humble enough to admit when we are wrong. Teach us to forgive each other as you forgive us so that we might be authentic witnesses to your love in the world. We pray in the name of Jesus, who teaches us by his life. Amen.*

Is there anything harder than going to someone you love to tell them that they have hurt you? It is probably one of the most difficult – and important – aspects to living in real relationship. It is so critical, in fact, that Matthew confronts it in his writing to the infant church as it struggles in its life and mission together. It is critical because the Gospel writer knew that the future of the community endeavoring to follow in the way of Jesus would depend on their ability to re-center themselves when they fell short of God's deepest desire for them.

Matthew's concern for how the followers of Jesus will exist in community is laid bare in today's reading; most likely, because the community he addressed was mainly a collection of Jewish Jesus followers who had recently left or been alienated from their synagogue communities.

Estranged from their Jewish siblings, they found themselves living in the same place geographically while facing the challenge of figuring out what it meant to exist as a new community. They carry out their identity among many competing possibilities. Grounded in their commitment to Jesus' call on their lives, they choose to follow him – often at odds with the life and the people – even family – they knew.

As written by Kimberly Wagner, Assistant Professor of Preaching, the people for whom Matthew wrote were most likely a fragile, hurting, vulnerable collection of folks trying to navigate a new kind of community amid hurt and uncertainty. Compelled to guide others through Jesus' teachings, he assumes the community will experience pain, conflict, struggle, and disagreement as they figure out what it means to be Christ followers in the midst of conflict, Roman occupation, and the competing causes of the world around them. We continue to be just such a community today.

The reality is, when we live in authentic, vulnerable relationship with others, we are going to sin against one another – hurt one another – betray one another. It is part of the fragility of human nature. In fact, what does it say about the depth of our relationship if we are not capable of being hurt by the ones we love and love us in return?

Matthew's concern is specific. It is written for the relationships we share as a Christian community in the world. It is written because the power of the church to help shape the world according to Jesus' teachings depends upon how the world perceives that same community.

The way we engage this process will provide a lens through which the world outside our faith family will view the nature of God's desire to live in full and honest relationship with humanity.

That perception will undoubtedly be portrayed through our ability to admit when we fall short in loving each other through the process of honest reconciliation and forgiveness. This begins with a foundation of love: a love deep enough to be hurt and vulnerable enough to confront that hurt in order to restore the relationship to wholeness. Sounds a lot like marriage, doesn't it?

One of the great joys I have as a pastor is walking with couples as they prepare for marriage. As a part of that preparation, I facilitate their conversation through a tool called the *Pre-Marriage Awareness Inventory*. The "Sound Beginnings and Expectations" section of the inventory asks this question, with an obvious yes or no answer: "I have been emotionally hurt by my future spouse on occasion."

Obviously, in the best of all worlds, any one of us living in relationship with someone we love would hope that we could answer "no". The temptation is to think that the person we've chosen to spend our life with would never hurt us—and we would never hurt them.

"I have been emotionally hurt by my future spouse on occasion." It is easy to think that "no" would be the obvious – the best – the right answer to that question. But is it really? The fact is, if we cannot be hurt by those we profess to love the most, how deep is that relationship, really?

As in the case of marriage, it seems what Matthew is trying to teach us this morning is that the harm to the relationship does not come through the hurt itself. The harm comes in our failure to confront it. To confess that we have hurt another part of humanity or creation is to recognize that we have hurt God's own self; and because we are created in the image of God, with original goodness, we are created to crave reconciliation.

Be it our relationship with God, God's relationship with us, or our relationships with each other, we are called to live the grace and forgiveness that God extends to us day after day after day.

That is made most real when we extend it to those around us in a way that might look different from what we expect. Jesus' admonition to the disciples was that if the attempt at reconciliation is unsuccessful, try, try, try again. If their attempts continue to be unsuccessful, they were to treat their fellow member like a tax collector or a Gentile.

How was it that Jesus treated those particular groups? He did not reject them. He let them continue on their way. The language of tax collector or Gentile is not a language of complete or permanent rejection. In the presence of Jesus, it is the absolute opposite. Jesus was condemned for regularly eating with tax collectors and he ministered freely among the Gentiles.

Through Jesus' example, we learn that while someone can move outside the bounds of our community, they can never move beyond the bounds of God's grace and the possibility of future restoration.

In a world where it is so easy to dismiss or cut off those we disagree with, we are called – in this place and in our relationships here – to center ourselves on being reconciled to one another. Both for the sake of our relationship and for the sake of the dream of God which brought the world into being. The pain in our broken relationships is also God's pain; but God is love. And God is found even – perhaps even most especially – in the brokenness of the love we share with one another.

This does not mean that we agree perfectly and completely on everything. That is ridiculous and it is impossible. It is impossible because, as we come together in this place and for God's purpose, we bring all of us with us. We bring all of our experiences and our beliefs; all of our hurts and our fears; all of our biases and judgments.

We bring them with us and we lay them down at the foot of the cross – the essence of brokenness – the intersection of God's reconciliation with humanity. We lay them down and center ourselves on God's call for us to care for the world – God's Work. Our Hands.

Amen