

Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, March 17, 2024

"Wandering Heart: Teach Me"

Young at Heart Message

When I was a kid – maybe 10 or 12 years old - I lived on a cul-de-sac where there were three other houses besides mine.

There was another family with two girls who were similar ages as me and my sister – the older girl was a year older than me, and the younger girl was in my sister's grade.

Behind my house was a line of trees, and behind that line of trees was a subdivision.

Directly beyond those trees was another house where a girl lived who was also a year older than me.

There were not a lot of kids my age who lived near enough to our house for me to get there quickly or easily.

So often, the other kids I would play with were the two girls who were a year older than me, my sister, and the girl who was my sister's age.

The problem with this arrangement was that the two older girls would often bully me.

I was a year younger than they were, so we didn't "hang out" with the same group of friends at school.

My sister and the younger girl were typically relieved from the bullying because they were young enough to be in a totally different school than me and the two older girls.

So, I was often the one who was bullied in this "friendship." And by "friendship," I really mean a strange relationship which ebbed and flowed, and most often I was only "friends" with the two older girls when they needed or wanted something from me.

Otherwise, we weren't friends so much as I was the one who got picked on or bullied.

I don't recall what exactly they did to me one day, but I'd had enough.

I didn't know how to make my situation better, so I decided to write a letter to the girl who was the worst bully and put it in her mailbox.

The letter, however, wasn't supposed to be from me, per se.

Instead, I wrote it as though I was one of the more popular girls in *their* grade, and as such, I was going to bully *them* if they didn't stop bullying other people.

It was, at best, a useless threat. Of course it was only intended to scare them into stopping their bullying and be nice to me.

And of course, it didn't work.

The mother of one of the girls reached out to my mother and told her about the letter.

My mom, then, asked me about it. I wasn't good at lying, especially to my parents, so I began to cry and explain why I did it.

My mom understood that I felt bullied, but she also said I needed to apologize to the girl I sent the letter to.

This felt really unfair – after all, *she* had been bullying *me*!

Nonetheless, we arranged an afternoon after school to go over to her house so I could apologize.

I was mortified, I have to admit. I was also full of guilt and shame.

So, we walked into the girl's house, and I mustered up the courage to apologize for sending the note.

After my apology, the girl just said "OK!" and that was the end of it.

She said nothing else. She didn't forgive me. She didn't blame me or yell at me. Just "OK!" and all was well.

It was awkward, and puzzling at the same time.

In hindsight, I think she probably felt just as guilty and ashamed as I did. Her mom probably talked to her about bullying as well, and she probably wanted it to be over just as much as I did.

But, neither of us really received closure or forgiveness. And, while I did have reason to apologize, it felt unfair that she had reason to apologize as well, but didn't.

She had been the one who was so mean to me that I felt like I had no other options!

And yet, the incident and my apology taught us both an important lesson, I think, about how to treat others and about how to resolve conflict.

I suspect that neither of us realized the lesson we were learning at the time, though.

I can tell you that I kept the letter and I put it in a spot in my bedroom with a big note on it that said:

Don't do this again!

This situation may seem silly as I look back on it today, but through these lessons we learn as young people, we somehow manage to move into adulthood with some skills for handling situations like this again if needed.

And, we also learn lessons about forgiveness and bringing about a sense of wholeness.

I didn't receive forgiveness from this girl – not really. And she didn't receive forgiveness from me.

So how do these lessons and the lesson we heard in today's Gospel message help us better understand forgiveness?

How do these stories help us better understand how we learn and grow as people?

The Message

As I was researching for today's sermon, I read an interview with Chanequa Walker-Barnes, a womanist theologian and clinical psychologist who is also Professor of Practical Theology and Pastoral Care at Columbia Theological Seminary.

I wish it made sense to read the entire interview because she has so much of value to say about forgiveness.

She offers the following definition of forgiveness as part of the interview:

She talks about forgiveness as “an **internal process** that is **directed outwardly**. It’s directed toward another person, and it is the process of letting go of the hostility that we have toward a person that **we perceive** as having wronged us.”

She goes on to say, “People often think forgiveness has to be contingent upon something the wrongdoer does — they have to repent, we have to reconcile, we have to restore the relationship, and they have to change...”

“...That keeps our emotional process held hostage to another person’s issues. Forgiveness is a way of taking our power back and saying, ‘I have my own feeling that needs to be done.’ Part of that [feeling] is my image of the other person, which is separate from the wrongdoer’s process. That’s even separate from the relationship. One thing understanding forgiveness as an internal process does is empower us to take control of that process.”

In other words, when we think of forgiveness as only being possible if the other person *does* something to warrant our forgiveness, we may never find ourselves able to forgive.

But, if we re-imagine forgiveness as an internal process, it becomes a process that we have control over, whether the other person acknowledges their wrongdoing or not.

And, it allows us to move *beyond* the outdated notion of “forgive and forget,” because often, forgetting harm that was done is not possible.

There are some people in our lives who will never admit they’ve hurt us.

Hurt is defined by the person who feels hurt, so it is possible for us to feel hurt by something and for the person who hurt us to either not realize, or not care, that they hurt us.

People can also be fully aware that they have hurt us, but be too damaged or unwilling to admit they’ve hurt us to ever be able to apologize or admit to wrongdoing.

Hurt can also go both ways, like in the case of my example from when I was a kid.

I was incredibly hurt and feeling quite bullied.

And yet, the neighbour girl was probably hurt by my actions, too. And, frankly, I intended to hurt her because she had hurt me.

So, forgiveness can be complicated.

This is why Jesus's answer to Peter's question, "How many times should I forgive someone who does something wrong to me? Is seven times enough?" is not predictable – it's infinite.

In the translation we read today, Jesus says "not just 7 times, but 77 times!"

In other translations, it appears as "70 times 7."

In other words, Jesus's math is infinite.

Forgiveness needs to be an internal process which works to heal our own hearts.

This is true whether we are the one who was wronged and is trying to forgive someone else, or if we are the one who hurt someone and are seeking forgiveness.

Jesus isn't telling Peter that forgiveness is easy. If anything, he's telling Peter that it can be incredibly difficult!

And yet, we are called to seek forgiveness and to forgive.

And, we can rest assured in our own grace and forgiveness in Christ.

This is not to say that we should live our lives however we'd like, hurting people for the sake of hurting them!

It is also not the case that we should not seek restoration and forgiveness.

But regardless of how successful we are at asking forgiveness for our trespasses, and forgiving those who trespass against us, we are forgiven through Christ nonetheless.

Grace abounds through Christ, even as we continue to seek understanding, forgiveness, and love for ourselves and for others.

According to Dr. Terrence Lester, "Forgiveness is a boundless wellspring of grace. Repair is vital, both within ourselves and in our relationships with others..."

"...These stories encourage us to embrace the transformative power of forgiveness and work toward reconciliation and healing.

They inspire us to open ourselves to the expansive grace of God.

By doing so, we can create a world where forgiveness mends what is broken, and where the beauty of repair shines through, illuminating our shared humanity.”

Amen.

Let us pray:

God of Grace, today we ask you to teach us how to forgive. We've learned today that forgiveness can be a difficult and deeply personal process. Teach us ways to offer forgiveness to others, even if they have not asked for it, in order to heal our own hearts. Likewise, teach us to forgive ourselves and recognize when we may need to ask for forgiveness from others. Help us to recognize that forgiveness can take time, on either end.

Teach us how to become whole again, to work toward restoration of our souls, and help us remember that we receive Your grace even if we struggle with forgiveness, either for ourselves or for others.

All of this we pray today in your name. Amen.