

“The Art of Forgiveness”

Luke 23: 35 – 43

There is an old Vermont story that is told about Clem and Abigail who had been married for many years. One morning over the breakfast table they had a horrendous verbal fight. Clem said things he shouldn't have said and so did Abigail. Finally, they both stopped arguing and Clem was the first to apologize. He took Abigail into his arms and told her that he was sorry for the things he had said. He asked her to forgive him. Abigail said that all was forgiven and that she would forget the whole affair. As the next few weeks went by Abigail continued to remind Clem about what he had said and done. Finally, she mentioned it once too often. Clem said, “Abigail when I apologized to you for the argument you said that you would not only forgive me but would forget it. However, over the past few weeks any time something goes wrong you keep reminding me of the incident.” “That be right,” said Abigail. “I want you to know that I have forgotten the argument and forgiven you. The reason I keep bringing it up is that I don't want you to forget.”

It isn't easy to forgive, is it and even more difficult to forget. When we have been hurt by others it is so natural to nurture the grievance and let it fester. It is like a cancer, and when we don't forgive and put it aside it begins to spread through all we say and do. By not being willing to forgive another, whether they ask for it or not, we cause and plant seeds of our own destruction. In the scripture lesson, one of the two men being crucified with Jesus recognizes who Jesus is. Our Lord says to him in (vs. 43), “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” In essence, Jesus is saying to this man, “you are forgiven.”

Earlier, Jesus had said in (vs. 34), “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Here he is forgiving those who wanted him crucified. This is one of the most significant and beautiful moments in his life and ministry. These people had not asked for forgiveness, but Jesus was willing to forgive them and is asking God also to forgive them. In this context, we need to remember what Jesus said to Peter earlier in his ministry. Peter had come to Jesus and asked him how many times he should forgive his brother, seven times? Jesus said to him, (Matthew 18:22), “I tell you not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” In reality

Jesus is saying that forgiveness has no limits. There are, I believe, at least four basic attitudes that exist concerning forgiveness.

1. Those who feel that in no way can they forgive. For many people life is based on feelings and because they have been so deeply hurt, they say not only to themselves but to any who will listen, "Under no circumstances can I ever forgive. It is a sign of weakness to forgive and I am too strong to do such a thing." With this attitude nothing can be said or done to ever restore the relationship.
2. The individual claims to forgive but can't forget. This person constantly keeps bringing the wrong to mind, and thereby nursing the grievance. They love to wallow in self-pity while the wrong is upmost in their mind. This person is not willing to forgive seventy-seven times. Actually, they don't forgive at all even though they maintain that they have. When one truly and fully forgives, then the relationship with the other person has a chance to be re-established. But by constantly bringing the wrong to mind the relationship will continue to erode and all sense of trust will be destroyed.
3. There is the attitude of duress (feeling pressured into something). We give because we know we should. We know all too well the words of Jesus who commanded that we should love one another. Love implies forgiveness and forgiveness should know no bounds or limits. Reluctantly we say, "I forgive you" and we try. We push it down, we hide the hurt inside ourselves, but like a latent fire it smolders and burns within us. We know that we ought to forgive and forget for certainly that is what our Lord expects and we don't want to disappoint him. However, regardless of all of this, we find it very hard to really forgive and get rid of the bitterness that wants to linger.
4. The attitude that realizes that God is constantly forgiving us. Day after day, each of us needs to be forgiven for our short-comings, failures and sins and in his infinite love and mercy God makes his forgiveness available to all who seek it. For this reason, we too, should grant forgiveness to others. We know we are not worthy of God's forgiveness, but he offers it. Likewise, when others will not offer their forgiveness to us, we must not withhold our own from them. Having been truly blessed by God, we are called upon to share that same blessing. If we would be obedient to God, we have no other choice.

John Oxenham wrote a poem entitled, "The Ways". To everyone there opens A Way, and Ways and A Way. And the High Soul climbs the High Way, and the Low Soul gropes the Low, and in between, on the misty flats, the rest drift to and fro. But to everyone there opens a High Way and a Low and everyone decides the way their soul shall go. What is your decision concerning "The Art of Forgiveness"?

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