

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 6, 2012  
Lessons: Psalm 31:1-11 and John 21:14-17

## A VERY SPECIAL KIND OF HEALING

On these Sundays of Easter following the holiday itself, we have looked at healing of various kinds, because healing and salvation belong together. My theme this morning is the special kind of healing we experience as forgiveness. Nothing is more central to the Christian experience than our being forgiven and, therefore, empowered to become forgiving people, but for all we proclaim forgiveness and insist our lives and hopes depend upon it, we may not feel very clear about what forgiveness is and how it works in our lives.

The cheap view of forgiveness sees it as an artificial way of excusing wrongs as though they either never happened or don't matter – a sort of divine way of fudging the record because God can get away with it. I call this view cheap because that's what it is – cheap and shallow. Borrowing biblical imagery, we may preach and sing that our sins are washed away, but the actual experience can seem more like a light rinse. Real forgiveness is based upon the relational truth that the wrongs we do to God and other people really do matter but we matter more. So, forgiveness has to be real, and it must make a difference in us and in the way we relate to God and to people.

There is a social problem with forgiveness that we as Christians need to recognize and seek to resolve. While it is true that there is nothing more central to the Christian experience than being forgiven and so empowered to forgive ourselves and others, the society at large does not perceive us and our churches as forgiving. People expect us to be judgmental and condemning and to welcome only people who are very much like us. The Christian experience is that of being forgiven and set free. No, it does not happen all at once, which is the good reason it may not feel to us quite settled or complete. Our being forgiven is fulfilled as we become forgiving in our relations with other people, and our freedom is something into which we must keep growing continually as we learn in practice that liberation from shame and self-centeredness leads to humble service. Evil is lack of empathy and compassion; so the goal of God's forgiving us and setting us free is to make empathy and compassion our way of sharing life and our strongest weapons against the lures and deceptions of evil. Jesus made it quite clear that the person who showed compassion was much closer to the kingdom of God than the one felt good enough and right enough to judge others.

So, what is forgiveness, and how does it work? Like love, kindness, or any other positive force in human relations, forgiveness cannot be reduced to a formula because it gets complicated by many emotional, practical, and relational factors. We know that being truly kind is not always the same as being gentle or nice. Love is not always sweet, and forgiveness cannot always be tolerant. But there is a constant. Forgiveness always cares and so is never dismissive of people. Sure, almost every day, we shrug off minor irritations from family members, friends, coworkers, or other church members, but we shrug them off because we understand and care, not because we couldn't care less. If we made a case of every small annoyance, every thoughtless word or inconsiderate action, we would be fighting constantly. So, sometimes the spirit of forgiveness is a simple matter of telling oneself, "I know she's had a rough day," or, "he hasn't had his coffee yet," or, "it's just a teenage mood swing between dependence and independence." That's being understanding, and it's not all that hard unless both are stressed out at the same time or the inconsiderate behavior has been repeated too often. Then tempers may flair and the matter may need to be resolved. But simple tolerance of little irritations is not the same as indifference toward the other person. One is, "I understand, and so I'm not going to let it bother me, because I care about you." The other is more like, "I not going to bother myself about what you've said or done because I don't care about you."

Forgiveness is the very opposite of indifference. It can be soft-spoken or harsh, passive or confrontational, patient and calm or furious – as the situation requires – but its desire is to heal the hurt and make things right between the two of you.

Sometimes the relationship that has existed is so broken that it cannot be restored but must be terminated for the well-being and liberation of one or both of the estranged parties. Sometimes the offender cannot be reached in any effective and moving way. Sometimes the offender has literally died, making reconciliation impossible, but there can still be a self-healing kind of forgiveness that is truly an inner working of the Spirit of God.

Forgiveness does not justify the harm that has been done. It may be understanding of the reasons, hurts, and needs that led the person to do harm, but it does not excuse or rationalize the harm itself, because to do so would be dishonest and dismissive. I think I've told this story before but it's short and it fits right here. My mother had had a spat with a slightly younger friend in her neighborhood. Her friend, Nancy, came over to apologize. Being still angry, my mother said in response to the apology, "It doesn't matter." Nancy replied, "I want it to matter." My mother was moved, and the friendship was restored. Forgiveness requires wanting it to matter. Sometimes one party to the conflict does not want it to matter but wants only to minimize the offense or blame it entirely upon the one who got hurt by it. That's when forgiving becomes an inner healing for the one who did care. That's when the hurt needs to be turned over to God with the hope, not of restoring the lost

relationship, but of being liberated from it and from the bitterness and shame of its failure. This admittedly one-sided forgiveness can still, without getting phony and self-righteously pious, commend the one who did the harm to God and then walk away free. There's still grief for what should have been, and there will still be moments of self-doubt, but in such situations, forgiveness becomes a matter of no longer allowing the hurtful person to keep control of one's mind and emotions and of no longer stewing oneself in the toxic bitterness and disappointment of the experience.

Simon Peter has not only failed shamefully to live up to his own boasting, but has also denied all relationship with Jesus. Repeatedly after Jesus' arrest, Peter sought to distance himself from danger by saying he was not one of Jesus' disciples. Events had gone the wrong way. Peter had been ready to fight the men who came to arrest Jesus. John's gospel tells us he had cut off one man's ear with a sword, but then Jesus surrendered without a fight to the Temple authorities who condemned him and turned him over to the Roman authorities for execution as a rebel. Peter's courage did not extend to joining Jesus on the losing side.

Now, in the quiet confrontation between Jesus and his former disciple and close friend, Simon Peter, we see that forgiveness is indeed a process of healing and that the healing is mutual. Yes, Jesus has been hurt. It would be wrong to think Simon Peter hurt only himself, as though Jesus were invulnerable. If we think God desires to forgive people for their sake only, then we have missed the crucial message of biblical Christian faith. God cares personally and deeply about us and longs for the restoration of relationship with us. That God cares matters more than anything else. That God cares enough to become vulnerable to us, suffer our abuse and rejection, and still keep caring is the very heart of the gospel, of our faith, and of our resurrection hope.

Peter is hurt when Jesus asks a third time, "Do you love me more than these others do?" but Peter is healed each time he overrides his denials with a "Yes," and Jesus restores him to his leadership of humble service by saying, "Feed my sheep." That says, not just, "I forgive you," but, "I am putting my trust in you again." That's not just pardon or absolution; that's healing and restoration. Jesus even goes so far as to turn Peter's shameful failure into an asset for leadership, for now Simon Peter will have to empathize with the weak and shamed, and so he will be more fit than before for leadership in the community of faith. He who has failed and been forgiven, who once again has Jesus' trust, can now offer the kind of leadership required in the church. Forgiveness is an ongoing process of healing and liberation that requires our effort, not to earn or deserve it, but to realize it deep down so we let it work within us and among us to heal us and make us free. Amen.